T. G. NARAYAN

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FAMINE OVER BENGAL

WITH A FOREWORD BY

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TO

The Many Thousands of Men, Women and Children of Bengal

who died in 1943 denied the food they grew for other men's benefit.

FOREWORD

India is a land of many tragedies and Bengal has had her share of suffering in the past. But the magnitude of the present calamity has no parallel in past history. The food crisis in Bengal did not come unannounced. For months in advance the shadow of approaching famine lay across the province. The fact that official eyes were so deliberately closed to these signs is, perhaps, a bigger tragedy than the story of the distress which followed.

When leaders of public opinion drew attention to the growing shortage of food Government denied this fact and sought to divert public attention. Later, when concealment was no longer possible, it was admitted that there was 'some' shortage. But it was only after victims of the great hunger had come to the towns in search of food, and disease and death were taking their toll throughout the province, that the situation was finally admitted to be 'acute'. Even at this stage help was slow in coming. The Provincial Government had no scheme for distribution and no distributing machinery—the Centre itself, having no food policy and lacking a plan, could exercise no control. When, finally, help was sent, large quantities of grain vanished *en route*, causing great surprise even in the official world. Lack of organised transport further delayed food reaching the people even after grain had arrived in Bengal. Mr. Narayan has described in detail the economic and political background of Bengal and the events which led up to the food crisis. But no pen picture, however

vivid, can give a correct idea of the stark horror which transformed Bengal into a wilderness in a few short weeks.

As I motored through the countryside during the two occasions when I was able to visit the districts, paddy fields on either side of the road as far as eye could see were green and beautiful, giving promise of a bumper crop. In among the fields, by the wayside, in the lotus pools which are scattered throughout the countryside lay skeletons and corpses, making the air foul with the stench of decomposing human flesh. Disease had spread through the province, wiping out whole villages. Medical aid was lacking in the interior—drugs and medicines could only be obtained at prohibitive prices in the black market and so, even if men and women were able to reach the hospitals in their district towns, they could receive no help from the doctors in charge.

The story of Bengal's agony is well told in these pages. The acute stage is now over, but the problems which led to the 'famine' remain unsolved. Until these problems are satisfactorily dealt with, so long will Bengal, in fact the whole of India, continue in travail.

But this solution is linked up with the larger issue of India's right to be free and does not come within the scope of this Foreword. If the lesson of Bengal can strengthen the will of the people to freedom, then Bengal's suffering will not have been entirely in vain.

VIJAYA LAKSHMI PANDIT

Allahabad, March 1944.

PREFACE

A preface, curiously enough being the last portion of a book to be written, is a convenient place wherefrom the author can eat up any words he may have written rashly in the course of his work. By convention, it is also the part of the book in which he thanks those who helped him in his production in one way or another. There is little in the following pages from which I should like to recant. In the circumstances of time and place in which I wrote the chapters of this book, everything I wrote was written with honesty of purpose and to the best of my own knowledge of the facts behind the famine. My apprehensions about the recurrence of another famine in Bengal, in some form or other, are my own ; and no one would be happier than I if events should prove me to be a false prophet. Complacency and facile optimism where human happiness on such a tremendous scale is at stake are, to my mind, far more dangerous than a healthy, pessimistic wariness of what the future may have in store. And it would be prudent to make preparations to meet that dire eventuality, should it arise, rather than to sit back now that the tragedy seems to have ended and to say that it won't descend on us again.

I was enabled to write this book because of the kindness of Mr. Srinivasan, Editor of *The Hindu,* who permitted me to travel in the worst-affected famine areas of Bengal on behalf of the paper. Much of the material that has gone into the making of this book was gathered

in the course of those travels, and some of it appeared in the columns of *The Hindu.* My thanks are also due to the Editors of *The Swadesamitran* of Madras and of the *Forward* of Calcutta for their kind permission to use much material that appeared in their columns under my name. I am indebted to Mr. Anil Krishna Bhattacharya for his superb cover design and to Mr. Sachindra Lal Ghosh for assistance with the proofs. I cannot be sufficiently grateful to Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit for her contribution of a Foreword. She wrote it in spite of her ill health and so soon after her recent great bereavement. There are several others whom I should like to have thanked by name, but they prefer to remain anonymous. My consolation is the hope that they will recognise themselves when they read these lines, and to them again I should like to say thanks.

T. G. NARAYAN

GROSVENOR HOUSE,
Calcutta, March 1944.

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BENGAL

"Golden" is the word traditionally used to describe Bengal. *"Sonār Bangla"* is the phrase her sons and daughters use whenever they speak of her rich gifts of corn and jute, of fruit and flower. Today, they do not speak of a Golden Bengal. She is a land of many sorrows and leaden-eyed despair. The vagaries of nature and the blind greed of man have despoiled her of her wealth. In the place of sufficiency for all scarcity stalks the land. In the last few months many thousands of her children have starved and perished, beaten down in an unequal struggle for mere survival. And, in the months to come, many thousands more are bound to die of disease after hunger.

Bengal has known famines before. Two of the worst occurred in 1770 and 1866. They were primarily the results of the visitations of nature aggravated by the folly and greed of man. The 1943 famine, on the contrary, was without doubt a man-made catastrophe aggravated by adverse visitations of nature. To understand the recent tragedy more fully, it will be useful to survey some statistics related to the agricultural wealth and the population of the province.

With an area of 82,000 square miles Bengal is not the largest province in India. In population, however, she is the first with approximately 63 million people.. Every square mile in Bengal has to support over 730 people. Expressed in

another way, every person in the province has 0·82 acre to draw his sustenance from. But this is no true picture of the situation. Not all the area is cultivable. A considerable area is covered by water, either flowing or still. Four million acres are covered by forest. Thirty-five million acres are cultivated. Four million acres form cultivable wasteland, and, with proper drainage, an additional two to three million acres can be brought under the plough. On the basis of these figures, every person in Bengal gets only 0·58 of an acre to grow his food on. Ten years ago he had slightly more land; and twenty years ago a little more. Between 1921 and 1931 Bengal's population increased by 10·4 per cent, but the net sown area only by 1·5 per cent; and between 1931 and 1941 there had been a twenty per cent increase in population with practically no rise in the sown area. The Floud Commission warned, "We consider the pressure of population on the land is the ultimate cause of Bengal's economic troubles."

Of Bengal's cultivated land some 80 per cent is sown with only one crop while the rest grows a double crop. Rice is grown on over 21 million acres and, if the yield is good, Bengal's normal production is around 481 million maunds of paddy a year. To feed her population, on the basis of nine maunds of paddy a person a year (a quantity of ½ seer of rice a person a day), Bengal needs roughly 540 million maunds of paddy annually. Her normal deficit amounts to 29 million maunds of paddy a year. Expressed in terms of rice tonnage, Bengal's annual deficit is around 500,000 tons. In peacetime she used to import from

Burma certain quantities of rice, mainly to meet her deficit and balance the quantities of fine rice she exported to her neighbours. The balance of these imports over her exports normally amounted to some 200,000 tons. She thus ran short annually of 300,000 tons of rice representing the food of 18 lakhs of her people. Even in good and normal times Bengal was underfed.

Before proceeding to build up a structure of inference from the figures I have quoted, I must sound a warning that few dependable statistics about Bengal's crop production are available. Because of the Zamindari system of land tenure, Government have no interest in estimating yields, and production estimates are often based on crop-cutting surveys carried out in an unscientific manner. The Royal Commission on Agriculture characterised India's agricultural figures as "not infrequently demonstrably absurd guesses." So, there is no means by which the Government can evaluate exactly the food production of the province and judge before-hand what the deficit is likely to be. The consumption figures, however, are more reliable since the population figures are known.

Considering the natural and climatic advantages possessed by Bengal her rice production (18 maunds an acre) is low compared with, say, Madras. China produces over 36 maunds of paddy an acre, while the Japanese farmer raises three times the quantity of paddy raised by his Bengal contemporary. Yet, no other province in India or country in the world possesses greater natural advantages than Bengal. There are many

reasons why rice production in Bengal is low. I cannot do more than just mention some of them. The Bengal Government at no time had an imaginative, well-thought-out agricultural policy for the province. They were just not interested. The Permanent Settlement system assured them of a definite amount of income from land, no more and no less. Since taxation did not depend on yield, they never bothered with the task of improving production. Take, for instance, Bengal's capital expenditure on irrigation projects of some Rs. 3½ crores and compare it with over Rs. 20 crores invested by the Government of Madras, or with the Rs. 35 crores spent by the Punjab Government. No, the Bengal Government's Agriculture Department was never till now seriously concerned with the food of the people. Till recently, it did not run even an agricultural college. This vital nation-building department was at no time either adequately or efficiently staffed; and the good work it did lay solely in distributing small quantities of seeds raised in a number of Union seed farms. Expenditure on agriculture was actually cut down from Rs. 69 lakhs in 1940-41 to Rs. 50 lakhs in the following year, the year in which Japan declared war. It is interesting to note that the same year Rs. 4 crores were allotted to Civil Defence. And how many do you think were killed and injured in East India by Japanese bombs and gunfire? 816 killed and 878 injured since Pearl Harbour till April 1943. In Calcutta alone hunger and its after-effects killed between the 16th of August and the 16th of December 1943, a period of four months, over 9,300 victims.

The zamindar, who is a hereditary rent collector, is not interested in improving land so long as he can collect his rent. Between him and the cultivator a vast class of rent collecting middlemen has grown up and he has lost direct contact with the man who farms his land. It is impossible to fix the responsibility for agricultural welfare on any particular link between the zamindar and the actual cultivator; and the primary source of Bengal's wealth, her good earth, remains neglected therefore. The progressive increase in the number of rent receivers has led to greater and greater subinfeudation of land causing a proportionate rise in the number of landless labourers. Bengal's landless workers now constitute over 29 per cent of her total agricultural population. It is this class of people that is hit hardest in times of distress.

Bengal's soil is rich. Two of India's mightiest rivers laden with their tribute of silt have helped to build up her fertile plains. There is no dearth of life-giving water. The monsoon is a regular visitor. Indeed in East Bengal the problem is one of draining away the water that stays on the land. Beyond the banks of the mighty Padma and in the Sundarbans you will see vast stretches of marshy land with clumps of trees like islets in a muddy sea. With proper drainage much of this land can be reclaimed. In West Bengal, where the delta-forming process is nearly complete, the problem is of flushing the rivers and ridding the countryside of malaria. It is here that the erratically mighty Damodar, Bengal's river of sorrow, flows draining the rainfall of the Chota Nagpur Hills. In the summer weeks when it is in flood, cribbed and

confined by the Grand Trunk Road and railway embankments, it often bursts its banks pouring its flood on a smiling countryside, sweeping before it standing crops and whole villages and, instead of flowing into the Rup Narayan, finds a channel to the Hooghly above Calcutta. Thirty years ago the Damodar breached its banks and wrought considerable havoc in many districts of West Bengal. At that time Government set afoot an inquiry and their engineers decided on a scheme of controlling the river by putting up a dam to regulate its waters in an even flow. The coal magnates of Clive Street, however, apprehended that this enormous weight of water might seep through the rock fissures above the Jharia coalfields and flood their mines. And the Bengal Government's scheme was forthwith shelved.

There are rivers in Bengal which are not so alive. Many of them have ceased to flow and are dead because their parent streams have changed their courses. Go by road from Calcutta to the nearby district headquarter town of Jessore and within a run of fifty miles you will see three dead rivers. They are now stagnant drains, breeding grounds of the water hyacinth and the malarial mosquito. The Bengal Government has never systematically attempted either to control the province's living rivers or to resuscitate its dead ones. In spite of repeated demands and suggestions made in the past, there is yet no Provincial Waterways Board; and till the other day Bengal did not have even a River Physics Laboratory.

Bengal's rivers are important from another point of view. They are the province's fishing

grounds and, next to rice, fish is the most important article in the diet of the people. Here again the Government have failed to husband and cultivate their resources. Their Fisheries Department is not many years old, and it was organised after the model provided by Madras by an expert from that province. After that expert went away the Bengal Government borrowed another from the Zoological Survey; but, more than providing him with paper to draw up paper schemes, they did not put him in sufficient funds to carry out any largescale schemes. There are no laws to regulate fishing. There are no fish farms. Anyone is free to denude the fishing grounds of young fish and trust to luck and nature to produce the next year's crop. There is no Government-organised deep-sea fishing, and the waters of Bengal, like the land, are one vast neglected estate.

Due to a long process of neglect the health of the people, like the wealth of their land and rivers, has also considerably deteriorated. Malaria is endemic in many areas of Bengal and it accounts for nearly 30 per cent of the total mortality of the province. Those whom it does not mercifully kill it emaciates and devitalises to such an extent that they are burdens on the land. Its annual toll is some 500,000 lives.

This is the land and this the people on whom the long night of tragedy descended when Japan struck at Pearl Harbour on the 7th of December 1941.

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FROM PEARL HARBOUR TO MANIPUR

It is a long, long way from Pearl Harbour to Manipur, from the Pacific to the Bay of Bengal. But the armed forces of Japan covered this distance of several thousand miles in five months and eleven days. Japan launched her offensive against America and Britain in the 28th month of the war, on the 7th December 1941. A New Delhi announcement on the 18th May 1942 said General Alexander had successfully completed the withdrawal of his men from Burma. It was the 33rd month of the war. The Government of India in New Delhi had not yet organised a Food Department. Assam and Burma became frontline provinces and daily faced the threat of invasion. They, too, did not have Food Departments. The Allies had lost the rich rice-lands of Burma from which country in peacetime a perennial stream of grain used to flow to feed some of our people. Judging from the speed of the Japanese advance—they took Hongkong in 18 days, Singapore within two months after that—it was evident even to the layman that nothing could stop them from taking Burma. The backbone of Britain's Eastern Fleet was broken when the Japanese sank the "Prince of Wales" and the "Repulse" three days after Pearl Harbour. And as Field Marshal (then General) Wavell said, "We were always behind the clock, and we were

unprepared." By February the Japanese were crossing the Salween in Burma. On the 7th of March 1942 Rangoon was evacuated, and from then on Burma as a store-house of rice ceased to have any meaning for us. Military unpreparedness had its counterpart in civil unpreparedness, too. The mighty little gods in New Delhi and their lesser satellites in Calcutta had no thought about the people's food. In New Delhi they were engaged in a feverish conspiracy to sabotage the Cripps' proposals, while in Calcutta Sir John Arthur Herbert was digging the earth from under the feet of his First Minister, Abul Kasem Fazlul Huq.

The loss of Burma meant the loss of food of nine million people. India used to buy from her 1·5 million tons of rice a year. Burma rice used to feed the major part of the population of Cochin, Travancore and Malabar and also a great proportion of the industrial labour of Madras and Bengal. New Delhi, however, consoled itself with the thought that 1·5 million tons represented but a bare 5 per cent of India's own rice production and that the people could pull in their belts a little tight and everything would be all right. But they forgot, or they did not know, that no belt stayed comfortably on an Indian's body because his frame was already buckled in due to chronic hunger. He usually stayed on the borderline between starvation and survival and any sacrifice he was forced to make would result in death. No, the men at the Centre were not only blind but they were also crassly indifferent to the people's first line of defence, their food. They did not stop exports of

food. They did not build central grain reserves. They had no programme for increasing the nation's food supply.

The loss of Burma meant not only the loss of a valuable source of food supply, but it also meant a sudden addition to India's population. By sea and land, for five months from January, a steady stream of evacuees poured into India from Burma, some five lakhs of them. And, as the Allied armies retreated towards India, the reserves in this country moved up into Bengal and Assam to replace and strengthen them. More and more men from abroad were coming into this country, and the expanding war industries in Bengal attracted a considerable labour population. Add to this the fact that India's population is increasing at the rate of some 400,000 a month. The pressure on the country's food supply was something enormous, and Bengal's resources, in particular, were being strained to the limit. In the first half of 1942 she fed about five lakhs of evacuees for an average period of two months and must have acquired an addition of a million to her population, servicemen, industrial workers and evacuees, all told. She lost 200,000 tons of Burma rice and spent out of her reserves 150,000 tons to feed her guests.

These losses and liabilities were the result of the war. They could not be avoided, but they should have been foreseen and proper remedial steps taken. More tragic than this blind indiffierence, however, were the denial measures adopted by the Bengal Government in a state of fear bordering on panic. In April 1942, while General Alexander's men were still fighting a gallant rear-

guard action in Upper Burma, a Japanese battle fleet was moving off the coast of Madras and Orissa. It sank several Allied merchantmen in the Bay and carrier-based enemy aircraft bombed Vizagapatam. The fleet was moving down the eastern coast towards Ceylon. The Madras Government, completely panicky, moved their main Secretariat out of their capital city. Everything was set to carry out a "scorched earth" policy. The Madras Government, faced with the dire threat of imminent invasion, however, did not do one thing. They did not destroy the people's food nor their means of growing it. The Bengal Government, on the contrary, started stiffening up the defence of the province by removing and destroying boats in the coastal districts and in the lower reaches of their rivers. They compulsorily evacuated several villages, restricted the movements of such boats as they did not destroy, and in effect stood in the way of the cultivation of large areas of land in the coastal belt. It is impossible to assess with any degree of accuracy the extent of the damage wrought by this panicky policy. There are vast areas known as *char* lands where cultivation is impracticable without the use of boats. They are under water during a great part of the year and during the rest they are surrounded by water. To farm these lands the cultivator has to stay in his boat nearby; that is his home and his vehicle. There is also another aspect to this boat destruction business. Boats in the riverine districts of Bengal play as important a part as bullock carts do elsewhere in India. They transport manure, seedlings, and the harvested produce.

They transport labour. They are the arteries of the land through which its life-blood flows. Again, there can be no fishing without boats. The economic damage caused by this insane policy was to be felt in the months to come.

Related to the boat denial policy was that of the purchase of surplus rice in the so-called denial districts. Three districts were primarily affected : Khulna, Midnapore and Barisal. According to Major-General Wood, 30,000 tons of rice were purchased from the denial areas and they were to have been stored in North and North-western Bengal. Official figures stated that less than 3,000 tons out of this quantity were sent out of Bengal. They did not indicate how these figures were arrived at. *The price of rice at this time was around Rs. 5 a maund.*

A more serious consequence of the rice-denial policy was the fear it put into the minds of the cultivators. They were told that, if they did not sell their rice, the Government would either confiscate it or that the Japanese would rob them of it. Many cultivators, even without laying aside enough for their yearly needs, sold away their grain, and much more than the quantity given out by the Government must certainly have been removed from these districts. The price offered was a little better than the ruling one; the cultivator was thoughtless; and he and his grain were soon parted. The denial policy was a mistake and the way it was carried out was fraught with immense potential danger. It was a preventible mistake and it should never have been carried out. The Government's instructions on paper were that

sufficient rice for twelve months' consumption should be left in the denial districts, but very much less was actually left. The denial policy, together with the opportunity it gave to Government purchasing agents to spread panic among cultivators, was one of the many man-made factors behind the recent famine.

The responsibility for this stupid error should primarily rest on the Centre and the executive of the Bengal Government, and, to some extent, on the former Chief Minister Fazlul Huq and his colleagues. There was public protest against the the denial policy at the time it was being put into operation. But the Government remained silent and pretended to be wise since they had "the facts" and the public didn't have them. The ministers who also apparently had "the facts" did not choose to enlighten the public. The fact was that they were anxious to stick to their seats in the Cabinet and were afraid to fight and expose an executive which every day defied them. In a rare moment of courage, they protested to their boss Sir John Herbert about the way the denial measures were being carried out, but he lectured to them on military strategy and told them to go back to Writers' Buildings and behave like good boys. And did they behave like good schoolboys? You bet they did. It was not till many months afterwards, when matters had reached such a pass and when they realized that they could no longer please their masters in the Government and at the same time parry the public's questions, that their chief Fazlul Huq took courage to describe the Governor's part in the 'denial' business.

On the 10th of March 1943, in the Bengal Legislature, replying to a debate on the Food question, Fazlul Huq indicated his doubts in his own Government's statistics and said the then parlous state of things was due to matters over which they as Ministers had no control. He disowned Cabinet responsibility for the working of the Government's departments. It was a confession of surrender and a declaration of weakness. A fortnight later, Pramatha Nath Banerjee (then Minister in charge of Revenue), in reply to a question, revealed that the agents charged with the job of purchasing denial rice had entered into agreements with the Governor without the knowledge of the Cabinet. The same gentleman later on confessed on the floor of the Assembly that the Ministry had no control either over exports of rice from the province or over the administration of the denial policy. Fazlul Huq, after he had given up office in March 1943, grew bolder and told the full story behind the denial policy at public meetings and in the Bengal Assembly. He said the rice denial and the boat destruction policies were inaugurated without the knowledge of his Ministry and in their execution they had no control. On instructions from the Central Government in April 1942, Sir John Herbert, without consulting his Chief Minister and on his own initiative, ordered the removal within two days of surplus rice from the denial districts. He advanced on his own responsibility a huge sum to the purchasing agents, and ordered Mr. Kriplani, a Secretary in the Commerce Department, to produce the agents in a hurry.

The harassed Secretary after a telephonic search located an agent in Mirza Ali Akbar. All these steps were taken when Fazlul Huq was away at Delhi without his knowledge and consent. And when he returned from Delhi he did not like the shape of things and duly lodged a protest. He appointed some more agents himself and then forgot all about it until he had to come out of office and tell the tale of the Governor's interference in an effort to defend his weakness. Fazlul Huq's story served to prove two things; if the Centre and Sir John Herbert were chiefly responsible for the boat denial and the rice removal policies, Fazlul Huq and his men, by their silent compliance, were also accessories to the folly.

The story of the denial policy is a story of the Governor's and the permanent executive's naked interference with ministerial responsibility. It is a story of the sabotage of Provincial Autonomy by the Civil Service acting in collusion with and under the instructions of the agents in India of the British Parliament. It is a story which exposes Provincial Autonomy as a Government of responsibility without power in conjunction with power without responsibility. Provincial Autonomy is a diabolically clever device which took in most of our patriots and politicians when they agreed to give it a trial in 1937. But in its working the privilege of the last laugh was and has always been with the India Office, now in the grip of Leopold Stennett Amery, the India-born Secretary of State for India. The working of Provincial Autonomy in Bengal was one of the main causes of the recent famine. Amery may say that food is the

responsibility of the Provincial Legislatures and seek to thrust the blame for failures on them, absolve New Delhi and London of guilt and give room to Lady Astor and British propaganda that Indians are unfit to manage their affairs. But the world will not be deceived.

It is not strange or surprising that Amery should try to deceive the world. He is a die-hard British Tory who believes in holding the British Empire. But it is wondrous strange that Indians should deceive fellow Indians. It was strange that Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (Food Minister in the Nazimuddin Cabinet that has succeeded Fazlul Huq's), three weeks after assuming office, should state at a press conference that the denial policy and large exports from the province were not responsible for the situation. Of course, no one reason is ever usually big enough to overwhelm an entire people in tragedy. It is a succession of follies acting in combination that break down a people at the particular point in time when the people reach the nadir of their resistance. The loss of Burma rice by itself was not a chief factor; neither was the influx of evacuees nor that of industrial labour. The boat destruction policy by itself would not have reduced Bengal to this pitiful plight and the removal of denial rice was certainly not the single cause of the 1943 famine. The point was that some of these inevitable disasters—which though they cast their shadows before were unprovided for—were followed in quick succession by mistakes which no government should have made. I must not forget to mention that Suhrawardy, at the time he refused to attribute the situation to the

denial policy and to the large exports of grain, was in the goodly company of Sir Muhammad Azizul Haque, then Food Member of the Government of India, and Major-General Wood, then Food Secretary to the Central Government. Suhrawardy had to be on his best behaviour and he toed the line. His notes said the overall stock position was good in Bengal and Suhrawardy said it. Exactly four months later Suhrawardy was to become a sadder and a wiser man. He ate up many of his words, admitted shortage, and included among the reasons for it the boat denial policy, evacuation of coastal areas, loss of Burma rice, consumption by the defence services and loss of areas vacated for aerodrome construction. Suhrawardy, who said the stock position was good when he took up office in April 1943, less than five months later when over 2,000 people had died of hunger in Calcutta alone, said on the floor of the Bengal Assembly (15th September 1943), "We have had a terrible legacy to cope with."

Some two thousand years ago a Roman judge in Palestine asked, "What is truth?"; but knowing the answer he did not wait for a reply. The people of Bengal, suffering and starving, ask of their representatives in the Government, "What is *the* truth?"; and not knowing the answer they are still waiting for a reply. The Government of Bengal, who know a good deal of *the truth* behind the famine, will not, however, be willing to answer their people in a hurry.

3

HUQ VERSUS HERBERT

I have not read Antisthenes and so I do not know the philosophic tenets of the Cynic sect. Nevertheless, when I took my first lessons in journalism I learnt to be a cynic according to my own lights. I learnt that journalists who ever made good began their career by becoming good cynics—oh no, don't smile, this is not a contradiction in terms. Good cynics are those who can evaluate individual human nature correctly and call a man a good egg if he is good and a bad egg if he is bad and not mince their words. Good cynics are those who have shed the scales from their eyes and have faith in the goodness of human nature in general but not enough faith in the goodness of individual men. So, I learnt the difference between patriots and politicians. I learnt that patriots did not stick to office when they found themselves no longer able to do good to their people. I learnt that politicians stuck as long as they were able to do good to themselves. I learnt that far-seeing patriots kept out of office when they realised the futility of running Governments where there was only responsibility without power. Bengal, since Provincial Autonomy was inaugurated in 1937, was and is being run by a pack of politicians. And, working without aim or principle and guided by their own self-interest and by the permanent

executive ever out of touch with conditions around them, they combined to land Bengal in trouble in 1943.

Bad politicians can never make good economists; they can only make bad economists. The 1943 famine was not the result of economic forces inevitable in their origin and inevitable in the course they took. Economic forces and the direction they take owe their origin largely to political forces. Unfortunately, political forces in Bengal since 1937 have not owed their direction to any major national organisation working for the good of the people with a national vision to guide and light its path. Individual politicians, who owed their allegiance to none except themselves, came to office and, by the argument of patronage and persuasion, consolidated their hold on the Legislature and administered the lives and happiness of sixty million people very much as they pleased within the small ambit of power entrusted to them by their *employers*, the Bengal Government. Yes, these self-governing Ministries are *employed* by the Provincial Governments, for did not Amery say in Parliament, "Primarily food is the statutory responsibility of the Provincial Governments where these Governments have *employed* self-governing Ministries"?

Seven days before Pearl Harbour Bengal's unpredictable politician Fazlul Huq resigned his office in order to get rid of two of his truculent colleagues, Khwaja Sir Nazimuddin and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. He was familiar with this trick which he had performed once before. In June 1938 he dropped Syed Nausher Ali in this

manner. But that was in Lord Brabourne's time when seven full-fledged Congress Ministries were in power in seven provinces of India. Sir John Herbert, however, had different ideas of government and the times, too, were different. The Governor, therefore, instead of calling on Fazlul Huq immediately to form another Ministry waited to see if Nazimuddin could not form one. In the meanwhile Fazlul Huq did not let the grass grow under his feet. He formed a new party, organised new alliances and collected a sufficient number of signatures to prove that he alone commanded the major strength in the Legislature. Nazimuddin could not do that and, according to the principle of the Muslim League, he could not work with Muslim colleagues who did not subscribe to the tenets of Jinnah's creed. Sir John Herbert waited in vain for ten days for Nazimuddin to gather strength. Nazimuddin failed and Fazlul Huq was again called to office on the 11th of December 1941.

Fazlul Huq remained in office for fifteen months and nineteen days. An ill-star must have ruled the hour when for the third time he swore the oath of allegiance to the British Crown. The same day afternoon (the 11th of December 1941) his powerful supporter and friend Sarat Chandra Bose was jailed under the orders of the Central Government. Fazlul Huq, Chief Minister and Home Minister, responsible for the public safety of the province and the maintenance of law and order, did not even know of the arrest of his Assembly colleague.

The battle between Huq and Herbert had begun. It is a story which I must tell without

burdening it with much detail, for it is relevant to the portrait of the Bengal famine which I am attempting to sketch. It is a story of how at every turn Sir John Herbert, leading his executive administration, frustrated every attempt of the Huq Ministry to do good to the province. Fazlul Huq by himself was never capable of doing much good, but he had vigorous colleagues from the Hindu Nationalist Group and the Sarat Bose Group and they had some fight in them. No Governor, especially after the Congress Ministries had quitted office, liked to have Ministers who showed a bit of fight. Huq was a quick-change political artist and no Governor could rely on an undependable man during those days when the Indian Empire was passing through a crisis. Huq's associates were also suspect. He had as his team-mates Syama Prasad Mookerjee, a strong Nationalist, and Santosh Kumar Basu, loyal lieutenant of Sarat Bose. Besides, the Huq Ministry did not fit in well within the Imperial pattern for India. The policy-makers in Britain had encouraged the Muslim League and set it up as a rival to the Congress, and Bengal was to have gone to Jinnah as a province of Pakistan. It wouldn't do to dethrone the Muslim League in Bengal. So, Sir John Herbert set about governing the province as he pleased, interfering with his Ministers, encouraging the executive to look up to him and be disloyal to the people's representatives, and all the while he used his Ministers as the scape-goats of the Government. When finally he forced Fazlul Huq out of office in March 1943, the Bengal Government had such a poor hold on the province's

supply that the price of rice stood at Rs. 20 a maund, four times what it was twelve months before, when the Japanese were fast approaching the borders of India.

When the British jailed Burma's blunt-speaking Premier U Saw, they established a precedent for dismissing India's Provincial Chief Ministers whenever they forgot to behave. U Saw was the first to go on the 19th of January 1942. Constitutionally-minded Chakravarthi Rajagopalachariar, ex-Premier of Madras, cried then, "One of His Majesty's Dominion Premiers cannot be arrested in such a manner" Usually accurate, the Madras ex-Premier must have been indulging in a rare moment of wishful thinking when he called U Saw a Dominion Premier. But Rajagopalachariar in recent times had wished for more then he could get. Less than nine months later, on the 10th of October, encouraged by the U Saw precedent, Sir Hugh Dow, the Governor of Sind, dismissed Allah Bux, his Chief Minister. His fault was, he, too, was blunt. Five months later Sir John Herbert forced out of office Fazlul Huq, his Chief Minister. Fazlul Huq's fault was his increasing inability to be a scape-goat.

A crisis was anticipated after the arrest of Sarat Bose, and it was thought Santosh Kumar Basu and Pramatha Nath Banerjee would resign. Fazlul Huq, however, steadied his team and carried on. Then early in April the Governor, without consulting his Ministers, inaugurated the boat destruction and the rice removal policies and waved aside their protests. Men were appointed to key posts and transferred from them by the

Governor and the Secretaries to the Government without the knowledge of the Ministers concerned, and their consent was obtained afterwards. Large powers were delegated to officials without the Ministers knowing anything about it. High appointments in the Civil Supplies Directorate of the province, for instance, were made without the Minister concerned being consulted. In the administration of the rice removal policy, the Governor appointed on his own authority the purchasing agents, again without consulting his Ministers. Sir John Herbert refused to permit Fazlul Huq to enlarge his Ministry of nine so that he might keep contented the Scheduled Caste Group, but, after he had thrown out Fazlul Huq, he let Nazimuddin have a Ministry of thirteen with thirteen Parliamentary Secretaries and four Whips.

Came next the August upheaval, which thoroughly shook the foundations of Britain's Empire in India and which was quelled by such force that it for ever divided India from Britain. Self-governing Ministries had a difficult time reconciling their conscience with the violence of the methods they had to adopt in maintaining peace and order. The orders to crush the revolt came from the Centre and they obeyed. So, in Bengal, as elsewhere, the Police arrested patriots and publicmen, students and legislators and all manner of men without consulting their Home Minister, Fazlul Huq. The police liberally used their fire-power and after many weeks managed to bring under control "the situation". In Dacca jail, where a fray broke out between prisoners and their warders, 38 prisoners were killed and over a

hundred injured. The Government imposed huge collective fines on the Hindu community in several localities and collected them. The full tale of the repression will never be known to the public until a commission is set up to investigate the history of that period. Fazlul Huq and his men were feeling uneasy. Syama Prasad Mookerjee wrote to the Viceroy protesting against the severity of the methods employed to put down the upheaval. Some weeks later he addressed Sir John Herbert, this time protesting against the indiscriminate imposition of collective fines, the repressions in Midnapore and other things. Dr. Mookerjee was fast becoming an uncomfortable colleague to Fazlul Huq. But he made things easy for his Chief Minister and the Governor by resigning his office on the 20th of November 1942. The statement he issued three days after he had resigned did not, however, make matters easy either for Fazlul Huq or for Sir John Herbert.

It is a statement parts of which I must quote. It is important because later on Fazlul Huq was asked to dissociate himself from it by the Governor and by the European Group and the Muslim League Party in the Bengal Assembly. It offered a vantage point to Fazlul Huq's opponents in the Assembly from which they sniped at him. To the credit of Fazlul Huq, it must be said that in his latter-day loyalty to his party and to his erstwhile colleague, he refused to yield to the wishes of the Governor and his European and Muslim League enemies, whose one object was to drive him out of office by fair means or foul. That they succeeded in driving out this unfortunately office-

clinging man by means none too fair is a different part of the story.

Here are excerpts from Dr. Mookerjee's historic statement. "It will be idle for me to deny that *we* did pass through a period of constant struggle, a struggle between *us* and those administrators who will fondly cling to the old ideas of Imperialism and believe that India can be ruled for ever against the will of her people. Since the 9th of August 1942, when an era of repression has started and a policy of violence and counter-violence has vitiated the atmosphere of the Indian administration, I have expressed my disapproval of the policy pursued by the Government. No Government can allow disturbances of public order to take place especially during a period of grave emergency without detriment to the welfare of the country as a whole. But I felt, and I do feel now, that mere suppression of external manifestations of discontent is not the sole function of a Government calling itself civilised and progressive and fighting the doctrine of Totalitarianism out of existence. The problem in India to-day is that we, Indians, have not the power to mould the destinies of our country according to our wil . . . We do not want the domination of the Axis Powers or any other foreign rule." Dr. Mookerjee then said, "The British Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have, from time to time, taken pride in declaring that even today millions of Indians are living under a system of administration where the functions of Government are in the hands of Ministers responsible to the Legislature . . . . *let me tell them, without any exaggeration whatsoever, that the*

Constitution that functions under the so-called system of Provincial Autonomy is a colossal mockery. My experience as a Provincial Minister for eleven months justifies me in stating, clearly and categorically, that Ministers, while possessing great responsibility for which they are answerable to the people and the Legislature, have very little powers, especially in matters concerning the rights and liberties of the people. *In Bengal, a dual Government has functioned during the last one year. The Governor has chosen to act, in many vital matters, in disregard of the wishes of the Ministers and has depended on the advice of a section of permanent officials, who are indifferent to the interests of the province* . . . . Apart from my general dissatisfaction with the attitude of the Governor, two specific matters in respect of which I have failed to obtain relief, even partially, relate to the imposition of collective fines and the handling of the situation in Midnapore. I make bold to say, without going into details, that collective fines have been imposed in Bengal in disregard of the Ordinance itself. Fines have been imposed on the Hindus in general, irrespective of their guilt. Up till now the Governor has declined, in exercise of his individual judgment, to give relief or to reconsider the present policy, although repeated demands were made by us. As regards Midnapore, ... the repression that has continued there has been of an extraordinary character. We are powerless to order enquiries or to deal with the officers concerned . . . . There is not the least doubt that there has been grave negligence on the part of officers of the Government

both as regards the suppression of news about the havoc and the organisation of immediate relief. We have been helpless in securing redress on account of the unsympathetic attitude of certain officials and of the Governor himself. Even now, the activities of the forces of law and order are obstructive of successful relief operations in the affected areas. It is inhuman that so-called relief and repression should go hand in hand in spite of our protests . . . . *For the sake of elementary justice and humanitarian reasons, Bengal must rise to a man and demand the end of arbitrary rule forced on the province by thoughtless and reactionary administrators. I know that all the members of the Council of Ministers feel very strongly about these matters, but they have found themselves helpless.*"

No stronger indictment of Provincial Autonomy has come from a man who has inside knowledge of its workings. And, perhaps, there is no other province in India where the administration has so defied the people's representatives as in Bengal.

The helpless Ministers stuck on for four months longer, harried by their Governor and his officials, harried by the European Group and their Muslim League enemies, till at last Sir John Herbert pushed them out of office. When Herbert fought Huq, you knew on whom to put your money. Fazlul Huq, of course, had other views on the result. He boasted in distant Lahore in April of 1942, perhaps to give his drooping spirit a dose of courage, "The Governor cannot dismiss me as my constitutional position is strong and I have a

majority. I am willing to accommodate in my Ministry the Muslim League and the Congress, but the men will have to be of my choice." Deluded man, he did not know that Englishmen had little faith in written constitutions, that vital parts of their constitution were unwritten (except perhaps the Magna Carta), and that they had one constitution to govern them at home and several to help them govern their subjects abroad. Even at home, they were rapidly enslaving their own people and had sent out of the country the Great Charter to be buried deep in a bomb-proof American vault and forgotten for the duration of the war.

To take up the story of Huq *versus* Herbert, Fazlul Huq promised the institution of a judicial inquiry into the Dacca gaol shooting incident. The Governor naturally did not agree to this and the Chief Minister of Bengal could not fulfil his promise. Leading Muslim Leaguer K. Shahabuddin tabled a motion in the Bengal Assembly that such an inquiry should be held; but he did this to embarrass the Ministry in power. Shahabuddin is now a Minister and he has conveniently forgotten the awkward business. Again, Fazlul Huq gave an assurance on the floor of the Assembly that he would institute an inquiry into the Midnapore tragedy. The Governor was very angry that his Chief Minister should have promised such a foolish thing and peremptorily asked him for an explanation in language that cannot serve as a model of politeness. Fazlul Huq manfully replied that he owed the Governor no explanation and warned him to use milder language

towards his Ministers. The Governor, however, had his way and he saw to it that no inquiry was held either during Fazlul Huq's regime or his successor's. In the statement he made in the Bengal Assembly on the 5th of July 1943, Fazlul Huq mentioned all these points and many more besides. He told how his visit to Feni, which he wanted to visit to investigate for himself complaints of excesses committed by soldiers against the local people, was prevented by district officers acting under the instructions of the Government's Secretaries.

The European Group in the Bengal Legislature also played a big part in dethroning Fazlul Huq. Since the beginning of Provincial Autonomy in Bengal this group had held and now holds a key-position in the Assembly. In a house of 250 its strength is 25, and it is important for any Government in office to obtain its support. Thus, though in a minority, the European Group has invariably been in a position to dictate to any Ministry what policy it should adopt. For four years since 1937 it enjoyed this vantage position. But, when Fazlul Huq formed his third Ministry he had such strength behind him that for the first time the European Group found they could no longer be the Ministry-makers. They began the assault on the Huq Ministry by criticising its food policy. A few weeks before the Huq Ministry went out of office, J. Macfarlane, in the familiar role of one who spoke more in sorrow than in anger, said the Ministers unfortunately appeared to be under the control of profiteers and hoarders and that they showed lamentable weakness in dealing

with those anti-social elements. On a later occasion, David Hendry, the leader of the European Group, was more outspoken. He wanted Fazlul Huq to dissociate himself from the various statements of his ex-colleague Dr. Mookerjee, but Fazlul Huq would not do so. Then David Hendry hit out, "We want this Ministry to go that cannot defend its officers from criticism. You cannot evade responsibility and still remain in office." The Anglo-Indian representative C. Griffiths analysed the position ably thus, "It is now clear that there is a fight for supreme power and the control of the province between the Governor and his I.C.S. officers and the self-governing Ministry of the Coalition Party."

The end of Fazlul Huq as Chief Minister of Bengal came on a sudden on the night of the 26th of March 1943. He received no warning that the end was so near. The Governor sent for him on that night and Fazlul Huq spent with him ninety minutes. Here is the story in Fazlul Huq's own words, "A long discussion took place about the formation of a National Cabinet and various proposals were put forward some of which I could not accept consistent with my self-respect. His Excellency the Governor suggested to me that I should formally tender my resignation. I said I could not do so unless I had time to consult my Party and my colleagues. To this the Governor could not agree and I had to sign a letter of resignation. . . . The letter of resignation which I was made to sumbit has been accepted by His Excellency and the letter of acceptance reached me last night at about 10 P.M." This statement on

his resignation was made by Fazlul Huq on the floor of the Bengal Assembly on the 27th March 1943. In answer to a question from Dr. Nalinaksha Sanyal, Fazlul Huq further revealed that the letter of resignation he was made to submit was kept ready typed. On the 5th of July 1943, in another statement he made in the Bengal Assembly, Fazlul Huq said that the Governor assured him when he took the letter of resignation that he would not utilise it until a move for an All-Parties Cabinet was initiated and the resignation was required. He further stated that one of the Governor's Secretaries, as soon as he had signed the resignation letter, was heard telephoning the leader of the European Group, though what the Secretary communicated Fazlul Huq couldn't hear.

The third Ministry of Fazlul Huq, which lasted for fifteen months, was thus a period of struggle between him and his colleagues on the one hand and the Governor and his administration on the other. It was a period of administrative chaos and confusion in which both sides neglected to care for the welfare of the people. The officials in defiance of the Ministry bestowed patronage on those they liked, and the Ministers in turn obtained patronage for their men as a price of their compliance with the edicts of the administration. It was a period in which corruption could thrive, and it throve so famously that men in high places and men in low places fell a prey to it. The scale of corruption only differed in degree, but in extent it was nearly all-embracing. In spite of the principles laid down by the Foodgrains Control Order,

permits to buy and sell foodgrains were granted to several people who had never in their lives traded in foodgrains. In what manner they were given and why they were given are matters which can be found out only by a judicial inquiry committee. Inflated money was pouring into Bengal to sustain her industrial output and carry out schemes connected with the war-effort, like the construction of aerodromes, strategic roads etc. Amidst conditions in which vital consumers' goods were in short supply and there was an abundance of inflated currency, cornering, hoarding and holding back food and cloth, helped by a state of free trade, became a general practice. Such controls as were in existence could be ignored or got round by means of graft. Except the cultivators, who did not possess much holding power, every man and organisation that had financial backing bought and held stocks of foodstuffs. The blame for hoarding should not be laid solely on the cultivator, who was interested in selling in a rising market, but also on the countless middlemen who traded in foodgrains, on the big industrial organisations and Chambers of Commerce in Calcutta, and on the Government of India's organisations in Bengal, all of whose activities were uncontrolled. They were among the speculators who, in greed and panic, in one sweep gathered up vast quantities of food stocks. The tragedy of a famine could have been prevented, if those stocks had been permitted to flow in an even stream under the control of the Government.

4

HAVOC AND HIGHWATER

1942 was a black year for Bengal. In that year World War 2, which as far as Bengal was concerned was far away in the three preceding years, came with a rush up to her very doors and paused as if poised to strike at any moment. Bengal became an emergency area and a frontline province. Five lakhs of evacuees poured into Bengal and hundreds of thousands of troops took up positions in the province to fight an invader who never came. Fear gripped the mind of the administration and in a confusion of thought, which was to result later on in a dangerous food chaos, the boat denial and the rice removal policies were inaugurated and pursued. Then blew the August political typhoon which it took Government a long time to quell. Nine weeks later, nature took a hand and there came up from the Bay an immense tidal wave and a furious cyclone that upset the lives of some two million people living in the coastal districts of Midnapore and 24 Parganas. Nine weeks later still, the Japanese bombed Calcutta for a week with clock-like regularity. To cap all these troubles, which a people accustomed to long suffering could bear with fortitude, Bengal's two rice crops, the *aus* in September 1942, and the *aman* in December-January 1943, failed partially, giving rise to a

dangerous shortage of rice. That was a blow which, if not warded off in time and with skill, was bound to kill several lakhs of people.

The British administration in Bengal, like its counterparts elsewhere in Britain's many colonies, was ill-equipped to protect the people from a succession of such blows. Those who managed Britain's foreign estates were men who did well in the classics or in some other allied subject and had managed to pass in a competitive examination. Or, they were chosen to serve because they came from some select families. And Britain sent out, too, many Colonel Blimps whose favourite pastime was to swear at the native and swig their *chota* pegs. Everything went very well in peace-time in the colonies, which were really the best of all places in this best of all possible worlds for Britons born. It was a different job to rule in wartime, a difficult job and one that would test their worth to the utmost. In this test Britain's colonial administration failed miserably. The administration in India, though never put to the test of having actually to fight a war on Indian soil, for a moment lost its head in panic at the threat of invasion. It lost its head during August 1942. In Bengal, it lost its head during April, August, October and December of the same year. It was living for the day, with a never a thought for the days ahead, and in its self-created chaos it never planned to maintain the people's food-supply. The men who ruled Bengal were staggered at the immensity of the problems that successively faced them. They possessed neither ability nor intelligence, neither the good-will of the people nor their confidence.

The dear old boys in Writers' Buildings frantically tied themselves into knots with ever-lengthening strands of red tape and imagined they were vigorously tackling their problems. They mistrusted the people, lacked the vision to see the problems as a whole, lacked vigour to execute their policies and lacked the courage to fight the big hoarders, the Railways, the Jute Mills, the war plants, and other big employers of labour both governmental and non-governmental.

The effect of the August disturbances on the Bengal food situation is hard to assess in precise terms. Channels of traffic leading into Bengal were badly disorganised for weeks and, except for urgent military supplies, very little by way of foodgrains could have moved into Bengal during August, September and October of 1942. Apart from the disturbances affecting rail communications, the military situation in East India was such that large numbers of men and huge quantities of stores had to be moved into Bengal and Assam throughout the year, and the railways could hardly cope up with the demand on their wagons. I shall have more to say on India's transport system during wartime and how its inadequacy and inability to carry the country's traffic has been an important factor in the creation of local shortages. It will suffice to point out here that between January and June of 1942 the East Indian Railway carried to Bengal 87,780 tons of foodgrains as against 180,212 tons it carried during a similar period in the previous year. The steps taken by the Bengal Government to quell the August troubles must also have had their reactions on the

economic life of the province. News of local failures of administration, fear caused by the repressive measures adopted by the Government and the imposition of huge collective fines must have induced many cultivators to convert their grain into cash and must have led to a certain amount of hoarding among those who could afford to do so. The Government's measures also alienated the trading public and their desire to co-operate with the Government. These are imponderable consequences which, though they cannot be evaluated in precise terms, nevertheless in combination have a telling effect on the economic life of a people.

When misfortune overtakes a people it never seems to come alone. In August Bengal's second and minor rice crop, the *aus*, partially failed. This crop used to help the people tide over the rest of the year till the main *aman* crop came into the market in December-January. No estimate was made of the shortage that would result by this failure and no provision was made to meet it. The price of rice rose sharply in September to Rs. 8 a maund, a jump of Rs. 3 from April. Rice was available, however, as there were still left some stocks from the good *aman* crop of the previous year. But the supply was getting rapidly exhausted and the province was fast careering towards the edge of a precipice. Still nobody cared.

On such a province sudden disaster fell on a day in October 1942. Those in Calcutta who got up from their beds early in the morning of that day (the 16th of October) saw through their window-panes that it was a windy and rainy day. The wind, however, soon developed into a raging

gale. Giant trees snapped and fell like nine-pins, lamp-posts were torn off the pavements and overhead power and communication lines were scissored to pieces and lay criss-cross on the streets. The storm raged for a full day and quietened down only in the early hours of the next day. The people of Calcutta, in blissful ignorance of the damage the cyclone had wrought to the neighbouring districts of Midnapore and 24 Parganas, set about repairing the face of their city congratulating themselves that not much damage had been done. They did not know then that on that fateful day over fifteen thousand of their fellowmen in the coastal areas of Midnapore and 24 Parganas had been drowned. What was a comparatively prosperous land on the 15th of October, lay devastated and utterly helpless a day after.

For five days the people of Calcutta did not know what had befallen their neighbours less than a hundred miles away. The knowledge of the disaster was withheld even from the Ministers of the Bengal Government for two or three days. None of them visited or was permitted to visit the stricken areas till several days afterwards. What Calcutta people heard five days later were only rumours of great havoc wrought in Midnapore. They had no authentic news for a full fortnight until on the 2nd of November a Government of Bengal press note gave a brief, preliminary account of the disaster. It was only then that the world outside Bengal learnt of the magnitude of the blow suffered by Contai, Mahisadal and Tamluk. At a conservative estimate (you know the Government are usually quite conservative with figures of this

kind), 15,000 people had been killed and nearly 200,000 head of cattle had perished. 15,000 is roughly the strength of an army division. It was as if an entire division had been annihilated. And yet the news of the tragedy was released so late and in such a form that it failed to hit the headlines in several Indian newspapers. *Allies capture Kokoda, Rommel attacks 8th Army and Nalchik Evacuated,* were some of the typical headlines in the newspapers of the 3rd and 4th of November. It was alleged that military security reasons prevented the earlier release of the news. That was a curious excuse which took in nobody. The enemy could not have profited by attempting a landing then. He would have been bogged in that vast, uncharted expanse of slush and flood where there was neither shelter nor food and where the very air reeked with the stench of thousands of putrefying corpses. The Army might have benefited by denying the news for three or four days until communications vital to them had been restored. But there was no reason why it should have been withheld for a fortnight and the stricken people of Midnapore denied the help the nation would have gladly sent them. One is entitled to suspect that the blame for the suppression of the news rests not solely upon the Army but elsewhere.

There are scarcely any graphic accounts on record of the scenes in Contai and Mahisadal either during the cyclone or just after it had spent its fury. The Government press note of the 2nd of November gave this picture. "In the afternoon of October 16, there was a high tidal bore forced up by the cyclone from the Bay, which broke into

the mainland and devastated a considerable area in the southern part of Midnapore and 24 Parganas districts. The cyclone was accompanied by heavy rain—at certain places it was as heavy as 12 inches in 24 hours. All the rivers in these districts were in heavy flood due to the tidal bore, as also rain and force of wind in the worst affected areas. There was a heavy loss of human life—the present estimate being not less than 10,000 persons in Midnapore district. . . . . As to houses, practically every "kutcha" house was severely damaged or destroyed and only "pucca" houses except those with corrugated iron roofs remained standing.

"The havoc caused by the cyclone was so great in Midnapore district that the first few days had to be spent in restoring communications, without which no relief work could be done. Immediate relief was, however, sent from the District headquarters when and where the conditions permitted. As soon as the news of the havoc reached the Government, water and food as well as medicines and anti-cholera vaccines, with doctors and helpers, were rushed up from Calcutta to the coastal areas of Contai and Tamluk sub-divisions in launches and barges. Four such relief parties have up to now been sent to these areas. Such relief parties were also sent immediately to the affected areas of 24 Parganas by the Collector.

"The devastation caused by the cyclone, particularly in Midnapore and 24 Parganas districts, is so great that relief specially in food, clothing and house-building to the stricken people must continue for a considerable length of time. The Government are taking all possible steps to

carry on relief operations on an adequate scale, but feel that such a stupendous task can only be handled satisfactorily with full and unstinted help from non-officials."

Reading between the lines of the unimaginatively worded press note, one will observe that for the first few days no relief whatsoever was sent; that for the first fortnight, when urgent relief was vital and many lives could have been saved, no effort was made to get large-scale non-official help and that only four relief parties were sent during that period to an area where over a million people had been affected.

A member of a relief party, that left Calcutta for the scene of havoc eight days after the cyclone, has described in a letter to his friend the many difficulties and the long delays he met with in bringing aid to the sufferers. He sailed down the Hooghly in a big country-boat towed by a power-launch and he neared Mahisadal after dusk. He looked up and saw a velvety sky pricked with stars and looked around and saw immense wastes of water with clumps of trees showing. He realised with horror that in that waste of water rotting human carcasses were floating about. A little away from the landing place he saw dogs and jackals fighting over bones and putrid flesh. He saw "houses demolished, crops ruined, cattle drowned, water polluted, and food swept away." He saw how "many people existed on boiled roots, a few shrimps from ponds, and on rice picked grain by grain from the saline mud." Let me quote to you a few lines from his letter. "A child's heart stopped while there was hope. How can I tell you

of that mother's agonised cry to the night, her clutching the ground? You were not there . . . On a road, hard by a hospital, by police and by food, a man lay sick for four days and nobody heeded. He died on the fifth; was left to rot in the sun. We played merry hell. Yes, life is cheap here to those with no soul."

You don't want to hear anything more. Do you?

The 1942-43 *aman* crop in Midnapore was ruined. 3,300 square miles of land were affected and 7,400 villages wrecked. Midnapore was a surplus district. The cyclone left it dangerously short of food. Official estimates put down the loss at 1½ million tons of rice. According to a statement in the Bengal Assembly, Rs. 11 crores worth of standing crops were lost in the cyclone. Midnapore, instead of being an asset to Bengal, became a serious liability.

Before the cyclone, this ill-fated district suffered from the Government's boat denial and rice removal policies and from the severe repressive steps Government had to adopt to put down political agitation. Till the day of the cyclone, disaffected elements in Midnapore had kidnapped nine persons including eight Government servants, and after the cyclone they kidnapped some forty persons including five Government employees. The Government's punishment of the "rebels" in Midnapore, if it was severe before the cyclone, was alleged to be even more severe after it. The demand for an inquiry was so loud and persistent that Fazlul Huq had to promise one on the floor of the Bengal Assembly. Dr. Syama Prasad

Mookerjee made further allegations against Government officials in Midnapore on the floor of the Assembly. He said, "Sir, I have got here certified copies of proceedings before the courts in Midnapore. In one instance—that is not a solitary instance but this is only an example—there was looting by police and troops in a house." Then he went on, "There are 78 cases of alleged dacoity, robbery, theft and looting reported by persons whose properties and persons were interfered with, and, except in one solitary instance, no action was deliberately taken by the police in respect of others. I have here details of 85 cases in which names were given and first information reports were lodged and not barring one case the police refused to investigatte and to protect the lives and properties of the persons concerned. I have also a copy of a confidential circular issued by the Superintendent of Police of Midnapore to the effect that for the time being nothing is to be done by the police if there are allegations of such a character."

Whatever was the truth behind these allegations, it was clear that the people of Midnapore were not as sympathetically handled after the cyclone as they should have been by the authorities. Under the circumstances, the relief measures they organised could not have been very effective.

Midnapore's cup of sorrow was not yet full. In August of 1943 the rivers Kalighai and Subarnarekha rose in flood and inundated 150 square miles of land on which a fine crop of paddy was growing. A breach in a neglected irrigation embankment was the cause of the mischief.

Again, a goodly portion of the district's *aman* crop of 1943-44 was lost.

More destructive than the Kalighai flood was the destruction caused by insect pests to the *aman* crop of Bengal in December 1942. The swarms ranged over large areas of West Bengal and many peasants reaped only a fourth of their usual harvest. It looked as if nature and man had combined to ruin the people of Bengal.

Bengal's 1942-43 *aman* crop was thus a poor one. According to the Government's own estimates, it amounted to a little under seven million tons. The consumption figure stood at around nine million tons. Thus, there was a definite shortage of two million tons during 1943. The then Minister for Agriculture, Khan Bahadur Hashem Ali Khan, admitted the shortage and said the Government were seriously thinking about the situation. Two million tons of rice represent the food of twelve million people, or 20 per cent of Bengal's population. You will remember, that was the figure of the affected population mentioned by the Muslim League Committee that toured Bengal.

Nature struck a final blow against the province when, on the 16th of July 1943, the Damodar breached its banks and devastated large areas in Burdwan in West Bengal. Paddy seedlings in the fields were swept away, several hundreds of villages were wrecked and many thousands of maunds of rice and paddy were washed away. A United Press report said, "Middle-class people and labourers, who were already on the verge of starvation, have been seriously affected. To

crown all miseries, cholera has broken out in some places."

By August the situation in Bengal had got out of hand, and the province was already in the grip of a terrible famine. The price of rice soared to Rs. 40 a maund, and in many areas it sold for Rs. 60, for Rs. 80; and in some—it was just not available. Several million people began selling or mortgaging everything they had in an effort to keep themselves alive. What they got by selling their all lasted them for a couple of months. They starved progressively, and progressively became emaciated, until they had no resistance left in them. By July, many had died. In August, September, October and November of 1943, they perished in increasing numbers. There is no information on how many have paid the toll exacted by the famine. Unofficial estimates vary from 10,000 a week in August to over 100,000 a week in November. If a census of Bengal is taken towards the end of 1944, it will be a revealing document.

5

THE FOOD MUDDLE AND HUQ

The combined effect of a series of blunders committed by the authorities, the inevitable strains imposed by the war's approach to Bengal and the natural disasters that visited the province was that the food position of the province was reduced to a perilous state at the end of 1942. In the course of one year, rice had soared up from Rs. 5 a maund to Rs. 12 a maund. It was a dangerous pointer to the approach of a famine. And, yet, throughout 1942, the Bengal Ministry headed by Fazlul Huq made no intelligible attempt to solve the food situation. In June 1942, the party in power, the Progressive Coalition Party, drew up a seven-point programme to cure all the ills of the province. Not one point dealt about food. Fazlul Huq's time was taken up in keeping himself in office, distributing patronage among his followers and meeting the barrage of propaganda launched against him by his erstwhile colleagues in his previous Ministry. He let the permanent administration of the Bengal Government run as they chose several departments, which constitutionally were the responsibility of the Ministry.

Towards the end of May 1942, the Central Government promulgated the "Foodgrains Control Order", under which traders in foodstuffs were required to declare stocks and take out licenses in

order to be able to continue their trade. A fortnight later, Bombay and Madras enforced within their territories the provisions of the Order. Bengal followed suit a fortnight later still. But the manner in which the Bengal Government administered the Order was open to criticism. They obtained no census of stocks of foodgrains, and a number of men who had never before traded in grain obtained licenses to deal in the commodity. There was money in the grain trade, especially as the market was rising, and it was a good thing if money could be got into the hands of one's particular friends for services rendered or to be rendered.

Bengal entered 1943 with a deficit of about two million tons of rice. Even if she had conserved all her rice without exporting a grain of it outside her area, she had no rice for some 12 million of her people. Her next harvest would be available only twelve months later. Nothing but immediate rationing and the rushing in of stocks from the very beginning of the year could have saved her people. Fazlul Huq cannot plead ignorance of the true facts of the situation. One of his Cabinet colleagues, Khan Bahadur Maulvi Hashem Ali Khan, gave out officially the deficit figures. How then did he say at the Food Conference held in Delhi in December 1942, that his province needed no extra rice and could manage to feed her people, provided nothing more was taken away? If he was ignorant, officials of the Bengal Government were by his side and they could have corrected him. Were they responsible for inducing Fazlul Huq to say what he said? There has

been no clear answer to this point. It is one of the many unsolved mysteries behind the famine.

Fazlul Huq, again, cannot say he received no constructive advice from the Opposition parties. As early as in February 1943, in the Bengal Assembly, demands were made for the introduction of comprehensive rationing and for the suppression of black markets. Some of the charges made during that session against Fazlul Huq are worth recalling. The Huq Ministry was accused of indecision and inefficiency and secrecy in the appointment of purchasing agents to the Government. It was accused of not banning exports of rice from Bengal. It was accused of not cutting down the jute acreage so that more land might be available for rice cultivation. The Ministry and the Civil Supplies Directorate were charged with corruption and bribery. The Ministry was blamed for introducing Price Control without first securing supplies and without organising an adequate machinery for distribution. To none of these charges was there any clear refutal.

Nawab Khwaja Habibullah Bahadur of Dacca, who dealt with "food" in Fazlul Huq's Ministry, in a weak defence admitted that the Government possessed no adequate organisation to cope with the complexities of the food problem. Next, he defended the "denial" policy and said over-riding military considerations dictated the execution of that measure. After making a passing reference to the difficulties faced by the Civil Supplies Directorate in finding the proper type of men in adequate numbers to perform its job, the Nawab blamed the Central Government for not exercising

control over inter-provincial movements of grain and for not providing adequate transport. The Nawab then held out the hope that, as the Civil Supplies Directorate obtained an increasing hold over distribution, everything would be all right. The Nawab admitted by implication that the Civil Supplies Directorate had been able to cater only to the needs of persons employed in essential war work, and that the problem of supplies to the great majority of the community either inside or outside Calcutta had not been tackled.

Discussing next the rice situation, the Dacca Nawab proceeded to show that there was only a million-ton shortage. He had conveniently forgotten that only a fortnight earlier his colleague, Hashem Ali Khan, had admitted a difference between production and consumption of over two million tons. The Nawab explained that no accurate data relating to rice were available. He then defended the Government's rice purchase policy and said it was designed with a view to spread evenly any shortage there was in the whole of the province. "It is our ultimate object", he said, "to supply the deficit areas out of our own purchases, but, till we are in a position to do so, permits for the import of rice and paddy will be issued in favour of approved dealers and merchants by the Magistrates of importing districts." Bengal started 1943 with an acute shortage of rice—and no amount of tinkering would have helped to save Bengal, except large timely imports. And the purchase policy of the Ministry instead of relieving the situation helped to create corruption and black markets and

send up prices. To conclude the tale of inefficiency, the Minister admitted that the Government's Foodgrains Purchasing Officer himself purchased rice at rates higher than those fixed by the Government.

The Opposition had many things to say to the Dacca Nawab. M. A. H. Ispahani, a pillar of the Muslim League, wanted normal trade channels to function and wanted control on wholesale prices to be scrapped. Syed Badrudduja, Secretary to the Progressive Coalition Party then in power, shed tears and said the people of Bengal were "bleeding". He committed a terminological inexactitude. They were not bleeding from open wounds, but were dying of starvation. He suggested a few good points; exports of rice should be banned and imports brought in; a census of stocks available should be taken and inter-district bans on movements of rice should be withdrawn. Vigorous-minded Abdur Rahman Siddiqui demanded immediate rationing, and Debi Prosad Khaitan castigated the Civil Supplies Directorate as being run by corrupt people and amateurs. J. R. Walker expressed lack of confidence in the Dacca Nawab and the Ministry, exonerated the administration and demanded the immediate release to the market of rice held by the Government.

The most vigorous criticism came from Suhrawardy, then in the Opposition, and now Food Minister to the Bengal Government. He said, "Mass starvation stalks the land and people are faced with a certain famine, if steps bold and drastic are not taken in good time . . . . We see before us a Government which has proved itself

wholly incapable of visualising, comprehending and tackling the various problems that have confronted us during the last sixteen months and which have been aggravated by conditions arising out of the war." He next took his cue from Walker and testified to the innocence and efficiency of the Civil Supplies Directorate and demanded the resignation of the Ministry. Referring to the non-co-operation of other provinces, Suhrawardy asked, "How can you expect other provinces to give you their surplus or to shorten their belts, if they are not satisfied that the Ministry in this province are dealing adequately with our own resources, that you are distributing them properly, that you are putting down black marketing, hoarding and other anti-social activities?" He then attacked the Minister for Agriculture for having said that shortage existed to the tune of some two million tons, since that had led to panicky buying and hoarding.

Suhrawardy ended his speech with the demand that the Huq Ministry should resign so that a "decent regime, wedded to the welfare of the masses", might tackle the food problem. Suhrawardy just made political capital out of the situation to get himself into power, just as today his opponents are making political capital out of his failure to tackle the very famine against which he raised the cry of warning. It was a clever speech. He attacked the Ministry, exculpated the administration from all blame, said there was no shortage (which view suited the administration) and maintained that fantastic prices were due to maldistribution and mistakes in policy. He

admired the administration and the administration admired him. They could both get on very well, since both of them were clever enough to rub each other on the right side and trust to luck and chance and the Indian's capacity to bear with a little more hunger to tide over the coming crisis. But what both Suhrawardy and the administration failed to realise was that by merely being clever they could not tackle the grim realities of a famine. The famine broke out during Suhrawardy's stewardship of the Food Department of the Bengal Government, and he completely failed to conquer it.

Abul Kasem Fazlul Huq took upon himself the task of replying to the debate. He was known to be clever with words and he could twist them and untwist them according to the needs of the occasion. He admitted the existence of a crisis and pleaded that it was due to causes beyond the Ministry's control. He mentioned *seriatim* the fall of Burma, exports from Bengal, the effects of the boat denial and rice removal policies and the insufficient yields of the *aus* and the *aman* crops of 1942. Then they tried control, but it did not work because certain sections of the community were bent on making profits out of the people's misfortunes. Fazlul Huq then said that unfortunately the population of Bengal had shown a very great tendency to increase. He went on next to pay a compliment to the Civil Supplies Directorate which he said was staffed by very good men and with whose workings, therefore, the Ministry did not want to interfere. When irrepressible Nalinaksha Sanyal asked whether Fazlul Huq had himself chosen the men, the Bengal Premier evaded giving

a straight answer and said he held himself responsible for their choice and their work.

When a man abandons working by principles and has recourse to expediency to solve the situations that face him, then very often what he says at one moment suffices to condemn him later on. Fazlul Huq and Suhrawardy by the several statements they have made on the food situation, each a variant on another, have condemned themselves more effectively than any one else can condemn them. The former was anxious to stick to office at whatever cost and sacrifice it might impose on the people, and the latter was equally anxious to oust Fazlul Huq, get into office, and, once having got in, stick again at any cost.

During March 1943, when the Bengal Assembly was debating the Special Motion on Food, rice was selling in Calcutta at between Rs. 20 and Rs. 25 a maund.

Prices in Calcutta, whether they be natural or artificial, have a tendency to regulate prices in the mofussil areas of Bengal. With rice selling at over Rs. 20 a maund in Calcutta, rice prices in the districts naturally went up. There was no natural reason why prices should have been so high in March. No immediate shortage of rice stocks in the province was evident at the time. The prices were purely speculative. The activities of Government agents, of competing buyers buying for the big Chambers of Commerce and industrialists in Calcutta and of speculators who had a lot of money on hand, which they could not profitably invest in healthier channels, combined to send up prices and led to hoarding on a large scale. Speculative

prices once they reach a certain high level tend to remain at that level as progressive consumption creates a real shortage in course of time. Rice is a commodity which must be consumed whatever be its price, and by July of the year, as stocks decreased, prices rose to around Rs. 40 a maund.

In the Upper House of the province the cry against Fazlul Huq's Ministry was equally fierce. Khan Bahadur Saiyed Muazzamuddin Hosain (Muslim League Opposition) said 20 million agricultural labourers in Bengal had been forced to buy rice at prices that were 300 per cent above normal prices. He wanted immediate rationing in Bengal both in the urban and the rural areas, and asserted that it was a feasible proposition. He said the Government lacked the capacity to deal with the situation. He charged them with more. He said, "I directly charge the Government with abetting, profiteering and hoarding."

Muazzamuddin Hosain is now a Minister in the Nazimuddin Cabinet. He is in charge of the Department of Agriculture. Many of the 20 million agricultural labourers who starved in Fazlul Huq's time died during Muazzamuddin Hosain's. Muazzamuddin Hosain wanted rationing when he was not in office. He has been in office since April 1943, and till today (the 25th of December 1943) there has been no scientific rationing in Bengal. He charged Fazlul Huq with incapacity to deal with the then situation. The same charge can be laid against Muazzamuddin Hosain and his colleagues now. He charged Fazlul Huq's Ministry with abetting, profiteering and hoarding. The same charges are being made

now against the Nazimuddin Ministry. What truth there is behind these allegations and counter-allegations, it is difficult to say without having any access to official records. These are matters for a Commission of Inquiry.

Begum Hamida Momin, with her woman's instinct for the things that matter, pointed out in the Upper House that there were still nine months to go before the next harvest and with prices round Rs. 20 a maund for rice, all of them were in for terrible times.

J. Macfarlane of the European Group expressed views that were convenient to the administration and which suited his party's policy. He said, "The belief is generally held, and it is admitted by Government, that large stocks of food-stuffs do exist in the province; but they unfortunately in the main appear to be under the control of profiteers and hoarders, and it is in dealing with these gentry that Government have shown such lamentable weakness."

The charge of corruption both against the administration and the Ministry was repeated very often on the floor of the Legislature. Nalinaksha Sanyal accused the Civil Supplies Department of corruption and said the Department was manned by incompetent men chosen without the knowledge of the Minister concerned. Khan Bahadur Abdur Rahman said the same thing and wanted to know how commodities found their way into the black market.

Further complaints were made against the Fazlul Huq Ministry's mismanagement of the food situation during the course of the debates on the

demands for grants towards the close of the Budget Session of the Bengal Assembly. Kiran Sankar Roy, leader of the Congress Party in the Assembly, expressed his apprehension that they were before one of the worst famines that had ever visited Bengal and said that the situation could be saved only by a Ministry representative of all major groups in the Legislature which could command the confidence of the public. He did not mince his words. He said, "We are thoroughly dissatisfied with the present Cabinet." Suhrawardy, finding a vantage point, struck again and said, "Sir, black markets have become a standard feature of this Ministry; they have ceased to be a scandal; they have ceased even to be a crime. They are a concomitant of the Ministry so long as it remains in power."

The cascade of censure that so mercilessly descended on the Huq Ministry was too much for one member of it. He came out with a full admission of the story of the administration's interference with the plans of the Ministry. Pramatha Nath Banerjee, who replaced his incompetent predecessor as Minister-in-charge of Civil Supplies, admitted that the Bengal Government had no control over exports of rice from the province, had no control over even internal competitive buying, and that in matters of food the Provincial Government had to take orders from the Regional Food Commissioner, a servant of the Central Government, who possessed "almost dictatorial powers". He went on to say that appointments to the Directorate of Civil Supplies were not the responsibility of the Ministry as a whole. The fact seemed to be that

the previous Minister was told about the appointments after they had been made and his nominal sanction was secured at a later stage. Once this person's sanction was secured, the head of the executive had no need to consult the Ministry as a whole. Pramatha Nath Banerjee revealed that his predecessor depended for the execution of policy on the advice of the officials of the Directorate. He further admitted that bribery and corruption were rampant "in every stage of society in the province". Fazlul Huq, replying on behalf of his Ministry that was to be thrown out of office a couple of days later, said what he had said before, namely, his Ministry did not choose to interfere with the working of the Civil Supplies Directorate, since it had at its head a very able civil servant in Mr. Pinnell. It was a tacit acknowledgment of their abandonment of responsibility. It was a confession of incompetence on his Ministry's part to tackle a situation utterly strange to their experience. He said the responsibility for the dangerous situation should be laid at the doors of the Directorate. Next, he signed his warrant of exit by announcing his willingness to resign in the greater interests of Bengal. He wanted a non-Party Ministry for Bengal, one that would be the nearest approach to a National Government. Of course, he would have to be included in it; or, at least, one of his men would have to be in it. Little did he realise that the Governor was to take him at his word, throw him out of office somewhat unceremoniously, and install a Ministry in office that was to be even more unrepresentative than Fazlul Huq's own.

6

THE FOOD MUDDLE : POST-HUQ

The Nazimuddin Ministry that succeeded Fazlul Huq's lent itself open to all the charges levelled against the old regime. It failed to redeem its promises to the people to give them food at low prices. It failed to prevent the famine that was impending when it came to office, from actually descending on the people of Bengal and wreaking its terrible toll of human lives, health and prosperity. It had three months' time to mend matters. It had the administration's support in improving the situation. The Central Government also showed more willingness to help than they did during the time of the previous Ministry. But all these were of little avail. The Nazimuddin Ministry, like the previous Ministry, lacked the courage to put down profiteering and corruption. It did not possess any more collective intelligence. It did not have more support in the country that the previous Ministry had. It depended for its existence on the support of the administration and the European Group more than any other previous Ministry in Bengal. And, guided in its policy by the administrations in Bengal and in New Delhi, it made the fundamental mistake of assuming there were enough stocks of rice in the province till the next harvest should come in. No intelligent Ministry should have accepted office after the

Fazlul Huq Ministry was thrown out, and provided scapegoats for the bureaucracy in New Delhi and London and an argument against the fitness of Indians to govern themselves. Indeed, the Fazlul Huq Ministry had stayed too long in office and in all decency should have quitted several months before March 1943.

Bengal, after Fazlul Huq's resignation, remained under purely bureaucratic control for a little over three weeks. And the situation kept deteriorating. Stories of looting of rice in the rural areas began to appear in the Press and crime was on the increase. During the time of the previous Ministry orders had been placed for the purchase of large stocks of foodstuffs in the neighbouring provinces and supplies began coming in during April. The province was being governed under *section 93*, and yet there were no signs of relief. It was significant that the Regional Food Commissioner, Mr. Justice Braund, should have uttered the following words then in a broadcast address. He said large stocks were reaching Bengal, but, "*We make one condition, and that is your own Government shall help you by a full, honest and energetic use of its own powers by seeing that distribution is fair and efficient, and by seeing that corruption and dishonesty are stamped out.*" Whom did he charge with countenancing corruption and dishonesty?

On the 13th of April 1943, Sir John Herbert invited Nazimuddin to help him in forming a Ministry for Bengal. Nazimuddin then outlined the policy of his Ministry and said, "I consider the first and foremost duty of the Ministry should

be to concentrate all their efforts in solving this (food) complex and vital problem." He promised to bring down prices, secure better and adequate distribution of food, suppress the black market, the hoarder and the profiteer and gave the assurance that effective measures would be taken to eradicate corruption from the administration. By the beginning of November Nazimuddin had been in office for six months : prices had not come down appreciably and they stood at double what they were when Fazlul Huq resigned; distribution of food, before the Army stepped in, was not in any way better and more adequate than in the time of Huq; black markets, hoarders and profiteers were still there strong as ever and complaints of corruption in the administration were being voiced quite as loudly as before. Nazimuddin had failed to translate his promises into practice.

The first important statement on food to be issued by the Nazimuddin Ministry came from the Civil Supplies Department on the 4th of May 1943. It is worth quoting in parts. It said, "The Honourable Minister (Suhrawardy) is convinced that any deficit this year can be fully met from the carry-over of the 1941-42 crop, and as a result of the steps which are being taken to rationalise consumption, and to popularise the increased use of substitute foodgrains, as well as the reduction in consumption due to the high price level. The public may, therefore, rest assured that there is no cause to fear any ultimate shortage of foodgrains." The statement also contained a warning of Government's intention to fix prices and to take action against hoarders.

The statement is important for a major and a minor reason. It denied officially the existence of an overall food shortage in the province. It promised price control. If there was sufficient food in Bengal, then how was it that the previous Ministry admitted a disparity between production and consumption of between 2 million tons and 1·5 million tons as far as rice alone was concerned? The previous Ministry had no means of getting these figures except from the administration. Did the same administration change its statistics overnight and tell the Nazimuddin Ministry that there was no real overall shortage of food in Bengal? Or, did the administration, as a matter of policy, persuade the Food Minister to issue a statement that bore no relation to facts, in order to allay panic and discourage the speculator who could operate most profitably only when he knew that goods were in short supply? Whatever might be the mysterious motive behind this tendentious statement of Suhrawardy, the results he hoped for from it were not forthcoming. Four months and eleven days after this statement was issued, on the 15th of September 1943, Suhrawardy on the floor of the Bengal Assembly admitted a shortage of rice in Bengal.

There is reason to surmise that he knew in May the true facts about the food situation. Otherwise, why was he engaged in making frantic attempts to import foodgrains into Bengal around the time he issued the statement? Five days later, on the 9th of May 1943, he said arrangements had been made with the Central Government to import into Bengal 14 lakh maunds of rice and 16 lakh

maunds of wheat and other foodgrains. The tonnage involved was something over 115,000 tons. It was impossible to expect the railways to deliver that tonnage in one month. But, if Suhrawardy promised to import this tonnage of foodgrains into Bengal, the Centre was even more lavish with its promises. Five days later still, at a Press Conference in Calcutta, Sir Azizul Haque, then Food Member, revealed that the Central Government had agreed to supply 550,000 tons of rice and cereals to Bengal. Much of it did not arrive in time to save the millions who died for want of food. In a speech he made a few days later at Krishnagore Azizul Haque again maintained that Bengal was not yet deficit in rice and held that the Government's statistics were accurate. The food situation, however, refused to mend itself because Azizul Haque, Suhrawardy, General Wood and a host of other official spokesmen most earnestly maintained that their figures were right.

Again, if the overall position was good, why did the Centre, in spite of protests from Assam, Bihar and Orissa, remove the inter-provincial ban on the movements of foodgrains? Bengal should have been left to put her house in order by herself without adventitious help from her neighbours which was bound to hurt them. In fact, with the removal of the ban, the famine in Bengal threatened to spread to her neighbours. From about Rs. 8 a maund the price of rice in Orissa jumped to above Rs. 20 and Rs. 25 a maund.

The Bengal Ministry and the administration committed an inexcusable blunder in misleading the public both inside and outside the province and

in misleading the Governments in New Delhi and London about the true position regarding rice stocks in the province. Muazzamuddin Hosain who had promised that he could get the facts within a fortnight and introduce rationing should have done so. It was not beyond human capacity or intelligence to have controlled the foodstocks in Bengal by June and introduced rationing, at least in the most affected areas. Instead, without controlling stocks, Suhrawardy announced price control of rice towards the end of August and he confidently expected that prices would register a fall. Prices did not fall, and Suhrawardy's efforts at price control had no better success than Fazlul Huq's had.

Ever since the present Ministry assumed office the food crisis deepened from day to day and a sense of panic and fear took hold of the people. Even in early May people from the rural areas surrounding Calcutta came to the city to buy what they could from the few controlled shops that were in existence then. Rice was disappearing from the districts as Government agents bought up stocks paying very high prices. How much was actually bought by the agents and how much of it was sent down into the black market is not yet known. All this while the Bengal Government issued warning after warning to hoarders threatening them with severe action. Hopes were held out to the public that prices would crack soon. The hoarders hoarded and prices did not crack.

Such of the hoarders as were brought to book were let off lightly. The Government perhaps did not realise that food-profiteers were as much guilty

of murder as any gangster who shoots to kill and decamps with the contents of the till. It is strange that nowhere in India, either at the Centre or in the Provinces, hoarders and profiteers have been severely punished. A colonial administration cannot afford to lose the support of the monied class on whom it depends so much for the continued exploitation of the masses of peasants and workers. It is not that the Central Government and the Provincial Governments do not know who the hoarders are. Their super-efficient and powerful police intelligence should know all about it. It seems to be a matter of policy not to punish them heavily. The British Government have no hesitation in severely punishing food criminals in Britain. How, then, is it that their agents in this country are afraid of following in their masters' footsteps? Perhaps, Amery will say that the Viceroy of India has employed a self-governing Executive Council, and there could be no question of interfering with their administration.

Several high-placed people in this country, among them Civil Service men, a man of God and a mild-mannered British General, have told me that they would support capital punishment for the hoarder. I have heard first-hand accounts of how a Chinese Captain shot dead a Chinese soldier who pilfered a few rupees from the till of a tea-shop in Mandalay, of how a Russian Company Commander summarily shot down a Russian soldier who had stolen a sheep in a Persian village. Well, if pilfering a few rupees or stealing a sheep in an occupied country should be considered by our Russian and Chinese allies a crime meriting the

death penalty, I do not see why we should deal less lightly with people who steal on a large scale our own people's food, thus inducing a state of acute starvation leading to death. A few shootings of hoarders in this country would have improved the situation. It would have been far better to have shot down a hundred hoarders than to have let a thousand people be killed for want of food that lay concealed in the hoarders' godowns. Public opinion in the country would have supported such a course of action. But these drastic steps do not fit in well with an Imperialist country's colonial policy.

Within six weeks of assuming office the Nazimuddin Ministry conducted a food-drive throughout Bengal omitting from the scope of their operations Calcutta and Howrah. Their object was to discover whether there were considerable hoarded stocks, to obtain a census of existing stocks and to put fear into the minds of the hoarders, thus inducing them to disgorge stocks in the open market. The results of the drive were not published for a forthight. When they were published, it was revealed that not only were there no considerable hoarded stocks in Bengal but also that several areas had been found to be deficit. In spite of the belated discovery of a state of real shortage, it did not, however, mean there were no big hoarders. They were at that time in Calcutta and Howrah. They benefited from the drive in that they were able to buy up stocks held by small cultivators who, because they were ignorant, were afraid that the Government would confiscate what little they had laid by for their yearly consumption. Stocks could be concealed by big hoarders in the

rural areas of Bengal. And, many of those who conducted the drive were after all human and liable to temptation.

At the end of the food drive, the price of rice rose up by five rupees and stood at Rs. 50 a maund.

Having failed to discover large concealed stocks even after searching Calcutta and Howrah, Suhrawardy next took the line that free trade in the Eastern Region would bring down prices. Free trade was declared and the miracle did not happen.

The purchase policy of the Government came under suspicion and questions were asked about the actual stocks purchased by Government agents and the quantity delivered to the Government, about prices at the purchase and sale stages, and about how these stocks were disposed of by the Government. It was becoming a dark mystery how prices could be mounting up so steadily when stocks were arriving into Bengal on no inconsiderable scale.

When prices refused to come down in spite of the several measures taken by the Nazimuddin Ministry, Suhrawardy turned to attack the Central Government. He accused the Centre of not sending the quota of foodgrains promised by them. He consoled the people of Bengal with these words, "Had the price continued to rise at the rate at which it was doing during the last Ministry, the price of rice would have been Rs. 100 a maund. I think it is a great achievement that prices are now around Rs. 30." Then he added that *he had been able to stamp out completely the black market in Calcutta.* He spoke these words in the middle of

July 1943. The price of rice was not then under control, and naturally there was not much necessity for the black market to remain black. It was only when there was price control that markets became black.

By the end of July destitutes from the rural areas of Bengal who had come into Calcutta had begun dying on the city's roads. On the 26th of July, 27 dead bodies were counted on Calcutta streets, and many more lay dying because hospitals refused to take them in. Corpses lay rotting and were removed in a haphazard fashion by a couple of non-official organisations. It was only a week later that the Calcutta Police Commissioner organised a corpse disposal squad. While the dead received some attention because they were a menace to the living, the not-yet-dead received none till about the middle of August when special hospitals were opened to treat "sick destitutes". Many of the "sick destitutes" were sick with hunger. The term "sick destitutes" was a euphemism coined by some genius in the Bengal Government's Publicity Department to describe the victims of the famine.

Bengal's Food Minister still would not admit that people were dying of starvation in Calcutta. Opening a canteen on the 4th of August 1943, he said, "The present scene in Calcutta is distressing. It cannot be said, however, that people are dying of starvation in the city. The real fact is, because of the want of food, the poor and the hungry are too famished to stand the physical strain and the climate, and whenever they fell ill they died because of their under-nourishment."

It was the end of August and the famine was gathering momentum. As food became scarcer prices became higher, till rice sold for Rs. 40 a maund. More and more thousands died of hunger and disease. The Government then announced maximum prices for rice. The price level was to be stepped down from Rs. 30 to Rs. 20 a maund in the course of four weeks. Of course, it didn't work. The *aus* crop of some 1·8 million tons was in sight and the Government declared their intention to buy it up from the districts of Nadia, Mymensingh, Murshidabad, Malda, Bogra, Dinajpur, Khulna, Jalpaiguri, Pabna, Rajshahi and Birbhum. Before they could do so, much of it went underground. How much of it was actually bought by them and how much of it was distributed through controlled channels is not yet clearly kown.

It was not only rice that was selling at impossibly high prices. Wheat, whose purchase could be easily controlled at the source and whose transport and distribution could be checked at every stage, also sold for very high prices. The Punjab which sold wheat strongly suspected the Bengal Government to be making sizeable profits at the expense of the people. Malik Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana, the Muslim League Chief Minister of the Punjab, spoke of "the amazing difference between delivery prices of Punjab wheat in Calcutta and the prices at which wheat products were sold to the public of Bengal." It did not matter to him that Bengal was being run by a Muslim League Ministry. His colleague Sir Chottu Ram was more downright and vehement.

He complained that the Punjab cultivator was being robbed by other Provincial Governments. He furnished figures. Here they are :

		A maund.		
Punjab wheat lands at Calcutta ...	at Rs.	12	8	0
Bengal Government sell wheat to the mills	at Rs.	15	0	0
Milling charges	at Rs.	4	0	0
Bengal Government rebuy wheat products	at Rs.	20	0	0
And the public buy from the black market	at Rs.	30	0	0

Sir Colin Garbett, Food Commissioner for the Northern Region, while addressing the Rotary Club in Calcutta made the sensational revelation that the Bengal Government had made a profit of just under Rs. 40 lakhs as a result of their transactions with the Punjab Government relating to foodstuffs. In most diplomatic language he said it was "probably due to some miscalculation" on the Bengal Government's part. Suhrawardy at that stage could not deny the charge. He admitted the truth of Government profiteering and said it was done to cover handling charges, and, besides, they were inexperienced in this matter.

It was now the turn of the Nazimuddin Ministry to face the music. Former Food Member Nalini Sarker said "the situation was going from bad to worse and, if matters were allowed to be continued in this way, a day would come when not only the streets in the cities but every village path would be littered with dead bodies." In the Bengal Assembly Syama Prasad Mookerjee thundered, "We have no confidence in the ability, integrity and honesty of this Ministry . . . . It is

not nature's hand alone that is dealing Bengal a death-blow. Political maladministration lies at the root of the present catastrophe and no lasting solution can come until India is economically and politically free." Present Food Member Srivatsava sniped at the Bengal Government from Bombay and complained that Bengal was not husbanding her own resources properly.

The Bengal Ministry, driven from pillar to post by criticism on every side, was compelled to resort to excuses on the one hand and to blaming the Centre on the other. Shahabuddin, Minister for Industries, pleaded in Delhi that the situation in Bengal was already out of hand when the present Ministry assumed office. Suhrawardy said they had inherited a terrible legacy. But, curiously enough, they were most anxious to succeed to the dangerous legacy. After assuming office they refused to admit a food shortage and continuously held out hopes of a fall in prices. They never took any rational steps to face the impending crisis and, on the contrary, such steps as they took had the effect of bringing about the crisis quicker. They could neither plead ignorance nor innocence. They played against hunger with human pawns. Hunger won. It is a rule of the game that you cannot remove the king; he can only be checkmated. The Ministry continued in office though it failed to ward off the catastrophe that wrecked and ruined the people of Bengal for generations to come. The people of Bengal do not yet see the light and are anxiously waiting as on "a darkling plain swept with confused alarms" too feeble to struggle against the unknown dangers that the

future months hold for them. Their fate is still in the hands of those that failed to save them in their time of need.

7

CENTRAL NON-GOVERNMENT

The Government at New Delhi cannot escape a major responsibility for the famine in Bengal. For full three years after the war began they had not stirred themselves to organise the country's food resources. They organised a "Food Section" in the 39th month of the war, and it was the 34th in their Department of Commerce and Industries. It took some more time before "Food" acquired importance enough to be dealt with by a separate Department. When later "Food" was separated from "Commerce", it did not have for a time the attention of a separate Member. Among all the Departments of the Central Government, the Food Department had easily been the most unfortunate. Its first Member resigned three months after he took charge of its destinies, and its first Secretary died in harness. Then an Additional Secretary ran its affairs without a Member-in-charge for three more months. The next Member for Food passed on the sickly baby after a few weeks of his holding it to the present Member, Sir Jwala Prasad Srivatsava. In the meanwhile, the Additional Secretary found a more congenial post and handed over his job to another man, who, in turn, yielded his place to the present Secretary, R. H. Hutchings. With so many swoppings of horses in midstream, it was no wonder

New Delhi had for long no definite policy regarding the conservation, improvement and distribution of the country's food supplies.

The growing of food, its procurement and its movement, though vitally inter-related, are not the responsibility of a single Department. The Departments of Labour, Education, Health and Lands, War Transport and Food, each one of these deals with one aspect or another of the country's food problem. There is little evidence to show that in the past there was much co-ordination between them.

For an analysis of the Centre's lackadaisical attitude towards the country's food problems, I cannot do better than quote a few lines from a brilliant despatch to *The Hindu* by its New Delhi Correspondent, Shiva Rao. He wrote, "Strange but significant is the fact that in a country like India, with agriculture as the most important industry, there is no separate department in the Government of India for Agriculture. The Member for Education, Health and Lands, is Chairman of the Imperial Council of Agricultural Research, two of whose officials are now accorded the privilege of being housed in the main Secretariat. The rest of the staff is at New Pusa or in Simla, while the bulk of the marketing section has been sent to Ajmer!

"Grow More Food", is the slogan of the Government of India. But how? What are the facilities given to the cultivator to increase the country's food supply? Recently, in both houses of the Central Legislature, non-official members from different provinces complained about the high

prices of cattle, in some areas the increase being 400 per cent since the commencement of the war. If zamindars find themselves obliged to reduce the number they can afford to maintain for agricultural purposes, the plight of the ordinary cultivator must indeed be desperate."

Shiva Rao next went on to reveal that the Central Government were not interested in irrigation schemes that would not come into fruition before 1945-46. Major projects were, therefore, ruled out.

Discussing the paucity of fertilisers, he said, "How deplorable is India's position in regard to the use of fertilisers, no one knows better than the agricultural experts of the Government of India. India's peacetime production was estimated at 28,000 tons and imports averaged about 84,000 tons in a year. Even this quantity was a mere fraction of the country's real requirements. According to the statistics available at the commencement of the war, Belgium consumed 600 lbs. of artificial fertilisers per square mile, Japan 410, Germany 310, Denmark 226, Britain 178, France 141, but India only 0·6.

"Sir Shanmukham Chetti, as Chairman of the Indian Purchasing Mission in America, foresaw, long before the Government of India turned their attention to the food problem, the importance of the large-scale manufacture of fertilisers in India. Had his advice been promptly accepted, American plant would have been busy to-day in India, making up our deficiency in the supply of fertilisers. The problem is a most serious one, since only about 10 per cent of India's normal

consumption is available, though according to expert advice, at least 50 per cent is the minimum essential to maintain India's agricultural production on its normal basis."

Shiva Rao then summed up, "One would have expected that an agriculturally-minded Viceroy would at least safeguard the interests of this primary industry during his regime. But Agriculture remains in the cold shade of neglect. Despite all the fuss made over the "Grow More Food" campaign, the total amount released by the Government of India is Rs. 99 lakhs as loans to provinces and Rs. 49 lakhs as subsidies. On this magnificent sum, the campaign is expected to make headway without cattle and without fertilisers."

Shiva Rao's penetrating analysis, mild mannered as it was, hurt the feelings of the Government, but it did not make them see their way to set things right.

If the Government of Bengal were two steps behind public opinion, the Government of India were three steps behind on the plea that the rights of Provincial Governments should not be interfered with. For a long time they took shelter under the excuse that food was the concern of the Provincial Governments. They forgot that one province's food was not always grown within the province and that the provinces of India were as interdependent as the counties of Britain. In peacetime conditions were different. Then neither the Provincial Governments nor the Central Government paid much attention to food. There was free trade and less strain on transport and the

trade managed the show. The war changed all that, and the Centre should have stepped in with an intelligent plan. They didn't for 39 months, and when they did they bungled badly.

There are certain matters connected with the country's food supply which fall entirely within the purview of the Centre, as, for instance, the import and export of food. Ever since the beginning of the war, imports of foodgrains into India decreased gradually until with the fall of Rangoon they ceased altogether. Exports of food, however, never ceased until a few months ago. After the fall of Rangoon, according to their own statements, the Government of India permitted to be exported from India nearly 500,000 tons of foodgrains. After the fall of Rangoon, India had no margin of safety as regards her food. There was a 5 per cent overall shortage. The shortage became more acute as food continued to be exported. This was a piece of tragic folly. It took a famine to make the Government of India realise that India must stop food exports and must become a net importing country to the extent of 1½ million tons a year.

In this context, I should like to quote a few sentences of a British Army doctor, Lt.-Col. Arthur Osborn, D.S.O., from a book he wrote on India. Osborn said, "Any one who has watched the progress of a famine in India cannot but feel ashamed of our reckless stupidity in allowing foodstuffs to be openly exported. Any race with less of the ox-like patience of the Indian would have rebelled. And yet we pretend they are a troublesome people to govern. Is this one of the reasons why we dare not let them have arms to

guard their cattle?" That was Osborn. To govern "the lesser breeds without the Law", a different code of conduct was called for.

The transport of food is another matter which falls largely within the sphere of the Central Government's responsibility. New Delhi controls a major part of the country's mechanised transport. Not only did it fail to stock in good time the deficit areas of India, but it also failed to move quickly adequate quantities of food when the deficit areas showed actual signs of acute distress. The country's railways were overburdened even in peacetime. With the beginning of the war and the coming of the enemy close to India's borders, the strain became colossal and the railways could not successfully cope with the demand. Here again, the Centre showed deplorable lack of foresight. Very shortly after the declaration of the war, Srinivasan and Humphreys, two officials of the Railway Board, pointed out in a report the feasibility and the necessity for the manufacture of locomotives in India. America at that time was not in the war; the necessary plant was available; and an existing railway workshop in Bengal was reported as being capable of manufacturing locomotives. The report, like other good reports, was shelved; the workshop was turned over to munition making; and the country's locomotives aged without hopes of replacement. War demands elsewhere also affected our transport. We exported locomotives and wagons, tore off miles on miles of existing track and sent abroad those rails and created a number of local strangulations in our rail transport system. A proposal to establish an

automobile manufacturing industry also met with a similar fate. Other types of transport suffered in other ways. The few ocean-going ships owned by Indian companies were taken over by Britain's War Shipping Board, and even the India Government could not easily get them back for their use. Inland navigation deteriorated as spare engines and boilers became difficult to get. Even bullock-cart transport suffered because cattle were being purchased at attractive prices by the Army for its food.

The Centre, in addition to mismanaging matters falling within its responsibility, also actively spread misinformation about the facts of the food situation. In an underfed country a five per cent shortage would not affect merely five per cent of the people but rather about fifteen per cent. On a rough calculation about fifty million people in India must have felt the pinch of acute hunger during the last six months of 1943. The fiction of no great overall shortage was assiduously spread by spokesmen of the Central as well as of the Bengal Governments. On what facts they came to this conclusion is not clear. At New Delhi Press Conferences, Government spokesmen have often admitted the unreliability of their statistics. At best they were careful guesses.

Even in the best of times, with rice imports coming into the country, large proportions of the Indian people were badly under-nourished. According to nutrition expert Dr. Aykroyd, the majority of the population lives on a diet far remote from the most moderate standards of adequate nutrition. India's nutrition experts have

been urging an increase in the production of cereals by 30 per cent, pulses by 100 per cent, milk and milk products by 400 per cent, vegetables by 100 per cent and meat, fish and eggs by several hundred per cent. In Dr. Aykroyd's opinion India can, by the application of modern methods, become fully self-sufficient as regards her food.

With malnutrition prevailing to such a great extent, it was strange that the Government of India should have asserted there was no great food shortage. It looked as if they committed the convenient mistake of overestimating production and underestimating consumption. In July 1942, Nalini Ranjan Sarker, then Commerce Member, stated that the rice situation in India was satisfactory and he even apprehended a fall in prices in certain surplus areas. When prices, however, refused to fall, and, on the contrary, rose steadily, the Government of India attributed it to large-scale hoarding. Hoarding there was and is and will be so long as goods are in short supply. The Viceroy (Lord Linlithgow) giving expression to the official view in the usual circumlocutory vice-regal language in his speech before the Associated Chambers of Commerce in Calcutta (December 1942) said, "Close study of the present apparent shortages and the high prices which are evident in many centres suggests that though India has, of course, been deprived of its accustomed rice imports from Burma, the difficulties of the present situation are due less to any real deficiency of supplies than to the mental reactions of great sections of the community to the abnormal times in which we are living." As against this com-

placent picture, Dr. Radha Kamal Mukerji estimated that India was deficit in 1942-43 to the extent of 430,000 tons in wheat and 3·24 million tons in rice. He said, "India is deficient to-day in her food supply for about 63 million people."

The assertion of "no shortage" continued to be made till as late as May 1943. Azizul Haque, then on a visit to Calcutta, said there was no real rice shortage in Bengal. Five weeks later the first deaths from hunger were reported from Bhola in Barisal, the richest rice-growing district in Bengal.

Finding that the public no longer swallowed the "no shortage" theory, the accent was shifted to "price control". When wheat in the Punjab was price-controlled, wheat went underground, emerged in the black market at high prices and an artificial famine threatened the province. After battling against the hoarders ineffectively for a long time, the Central Government decontrolled wheat.

The Central Government's confusion in tackling the food situation caused apprehension to Provincial Governments, and each, to safeguard its position, began banning exports of foodgrains from its area to areas outside. The Central Provinces and the United Provinces were among the first to stop exports, in spite of the fact that two price control conferences held in Delhi under the chairmanship of Ramaswami Mudaliar had deprecated the embargos instituted by the provinces. The Centre then constituted a Food Advisory Council and decided that purchases for the Army and the deficit areas should be made by one agency and

distributed by it to the authorities of the deficit areas, who, in turn, would be responsible for seeing that stocks reached the ultimate consumer through controlled channels at controlled prices. Surplus provinces then underestimated their surpluses, protested against the removal of foodgrains from their areas and put all manner of difficulties in the way of the movement of foodgrains within their areas. The Centre failed to exert control over the provinces when firm control combined with a wise plan could have ensured even distribution. Its grandiose scheme of building up a central grain reserve at the cost of several crores, therefore, came to nothing.

Meanwhile, one man fasted in gaol symbolising the hunger of a nation for bread and freedom, and three men of the Viceroy's Council resigned. The Food Department lost its pilot and remained in the care of a Secretary for nearly ten weeks. When Azizul Haque took over charge of this ill-fated department, Bengal was fast sliding into the abyss. He changed the Centre's policy and introduced free trade in the Eastern Region in an effort to save Bengal as well as its Ministry. The effort did not save Bengal. The ban on free trade was restored again in ten weeks' time. The other provinces found that Bengal was beggaring her neighbours. Orissa, which had exported 14 lakh maunds of rice before free trade was introduced, reported 70 deaths from hunger six weeks after its introduction.

The question whether there should be free trade between the surplus and the deficit provinces, or whether there should be a general ban (con-

trolled movements under permits being excepted), was really not so important as whether a deficit province possessed an incorruptible and efficient distributing machinery to utilise its own resources which could be supplemented with imports from outside. The Centre should have insisted on Bengal organising such a machinery, and, if Bengal couldn't do the job, should have stepped in and done it themselves. What was the use of sending grain to a deficit province, if much of its own produce was available only in the black market? Food Member Srivatsava was mystified at the way even stocks sent on Government account disappeared into the "bottomless sink" of Bengal, and he said he owed an explanation to other provinces on this matter. Stocks disappeared in Bengal because the Government of Bengal possessed no adequate distributing organisation and the Centre did not act up to its threats of stepping in.

Azizul Haque, during his brief stewardship of the Food Department, held a Food Conference in New Delhi in July 1943. The Conference decided to abolish price control of foodgrains and to abandon the policy of the Centre procuring stocks from surplus areas on behalf of deficit provinces. The deficit areas were left free to set up their own procurement agencies and make their own transport arrangements with the Regional Controllers of Priorities. The Centre left the provinces to devise their own measures to bring down prices. New Delhi thus tried to absolve itself from blame, if any province should complain that the Centre was unable to procure for it sufficient stocks.

But the Bengal Ministry had to blame somebody for their food muddle. So, after successively blaming the cultivator, the hoarder and the profiteer, Fazlul Huq and Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the Press, the war, Japan and the neighbouring provinces, Suhrawardy charged the Centre with not keeping their promise to send 500,000 odd tons of foodgrains. As the crisis deepened the bickerings became louder and more open. The Muslim League High Command took up the cudgels on behalf of the Nazimuddin Ministry, and Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan said the Government of India and the British Government were "guilty of culpable negligence by their failure to take timely and suitable action". In the Central Assembly, the Nawabzada shot at the Government again and said, "During the worst period of the crisis the Food Department was directly under the charge of Lord Linlithgow. It was a sad commentary on Lord Linlithgow's Viceroyalty, that the man, who had come out to India with hopes and promises to improve the lot of the agriculturist, should leave its shores with the worst famine that has faced this country. If Lord Linlithgow had devoted more time to the economic conditions of India than to the geographical unity of this country, things may not have drifted to their present state. Lord Linlithgow never realised his responsibility and duty. For if the military can give assistance to-day, it could have done so four months ago, with the result that thousands of lives may have been saved." It was a double-edged charge, designed to attack the Centre and at the same time to ward off criticism

that under Pakistan Bengal during a famine would have been wiped out.

Muslim League satrap Mahomed Ali Jinnah in characteristic fashion lashed out and asked, "Supposing in England, leave alone thousands, a few hundreds had died, will Churchill's Government be able to sit on the Treasury Benches for 24 hours? Here, we are told that recriminations and controversies should be avoided, when we are living under a system of Government which is irresponsible, irremoveable and thoroughly incompetent, tied down by fetters to their master, the Secretary of State." "It seems to me," he went on, "that you cannot get away from the charge that you have been guilty of gross negligence, that you have failed in your duties and responsibilities." He wanted to know who was responsible for misinforming Amery about India's food situation.

Jinnah recognised, however, that the Central Government was at last moving. "In the three months, August, September and October," he said, "you have done a good bit with success. How were you able to do it? Could you not have done that before? Why did you not do it? I can only surmise . . . . It is the military hand, which believes in action that, may be, moved even this wooden, antediluvian and incompetent Government to action."

Earlier in the debate, Food Secretary Hutchings gave away the Central Government's case and admitted they did not have a food policy a year before; they had one now. The administration, too, were far more alive to their duties and responsibilities than before. Two days later,

Supply Member Ramaswami Mudaliar put up a laborious defence of Government's food policy, but it didn't wash.

The new policy referred to by Hutchings was adopted by the Government of India in mid-October 1943, and it envisaged vigorous control by the Centre over food questions. Prices of major foodgrains in all provinces and States were to be statutorily controlled, rationing in urban areas was to be introduced and the Centre, while permitting deficit areas to undertake their own procurement operations, reserved to itself the right to advise, supervise and direct the provinces' food policy.

Since this last enunciation of the Government of India's food-policy there has been no changing of courses.

It is difficult to foresee what success will attend the Centre's new food policy. It still suffers from one vital defect; it has no iron control over food supplies raised in surplus provinces. Price control without the ability to control supplies physically has had an unhappy history.

Food Member Srivatsava had another stone in his sling, he said, to slay the famine-demon with. He announced with a histrionic air that even as he was speaking a food-ship from abroad was unloading wheat at an Indian port. He promised further shipments. Ever since the food situation worsened in India, token shipments of wheat from abroad did arrive occasionally, but never in sufficient quantities to ease shortage, bring down prices and break black markets. Some that did arrive in the past did not arrive on India's account at all. *The London Times*, which in the

early stages of the famine did not show any appreciation of its potential dangers, wrote in alarm, "The diversion of shipping urgently needed for the campaigns of 1943 in order to remedy profiteering in India is likely to arouse misgiving." *"Guns, not butter"*. The Germans refused to transport food to starving Greece; instead, they sent guns to guard her coasts. War against the enemy at any cost represented the *zeitgeist* and *The Times* reflected the times.

A significant contribution to the analysis of the causes behind the famine was made by Arthur Moore, ex-Editor of *The Statesman*. He wrote, "India's economy has been progressively deranged since 1930. The war, which has necessitated a large export of her products abroad and greater internal reservation of them for military purposes, has further increased the strain, as the public statements of Sir John Anderson and of Lord Wavell before he left England have judiciously recognised. To start recovery she needs a steady flow of food and of consumer goods even if the Allies start paying more in the form of imports, and it is essential that payment of this balance by inflationary finance should end. Because Britain has tended to regard India as her possession, it has not occurred to her to adopt the same sound methods of war finance as she adopted for America." Arthur Moore further urged the taking of immediate measures to cope with epidemics that would follow in the wake of the famine and the necessity for long-term planning to deal with the root scourge of inhuman poverty.

On the same day, India's Finance Member

scholarly Abraham Jeremy Raisman made an interesting admission in the Central Assembly, "The food problem and inflation are closely connected and the one cannot be solved without dealing with the other. The position now is we have reached a stage at which, in order to maintain the war effort, it is necessary to cater for civilian requirements; otherwise, civilian *morale* would undoubtedly suffer . . . . . Some day, when the history of the war came to be written, it would be found that the Government of India had been clamouring months ahead (that their demands and requirements should be given priority) . . . . And, as a member of the United Nations, India had to accept decisions which were taken at the very highest level." Earlier, Raisman said India had received large sums of money (for goods and services she had rendered to the Allies) which, however, she was unable to use. What was happening was goods and services for civilian consumption had grown scarce and the quantity of money in circulation had grown greater. This was the first direct admission by the Centre that inflationary war finance was one of the main causes contributory to famine conditions in India.

India's note circulation at the beginning of the war stood in the region of 175 crores of rupees. Towards the end of 1943 it was over 800 crores. The purchasing power of all this money to-day is very much less than that of the money India had in September 1939.

The Centre's apathy in facing the problems of the famine continued in more or less degree till Linlithgow's departure from India. He was a

tired man nursing his disappointments in the empty solitude of New Delhi's Viceregal House. He did not visit Bengal to see for himself her agony. His successor, on the contrary, considered it to be one of his first and most important duties to go to Bengal and resolve the situation. Within a week of his assuming office Wavell flew to Calcutta and Contai, cut a lot of red tape with one stroke and set the Army to work to reduce the famine.

8

THE FAMINE, AMERY AND GOD

The Bengal famine, in the final analysis,. is neither the creation of India Secretary Amery who is responsible for running India, nor of God who is presumably responsible for running the Universe, which, of course, includes Bengal. It is not also entirely the creation of the irresponsible Government in New Delhi. You cannot in reason blame the Fazlul Huq Ministry wholly or the present Nazimuddin regime. The Bengal administration certainly do not come prominently into the picture as they have employed most of the time a self-governing Ministry to which they have been and are apparently obedient. The Japanese admittedly are rice-robbers, and Information Chief Sir Sultan Ahmed has abused them to his great satisfaction. But you cannot blame even them really. If you blame anyone in particular, every one of them is ready with an excuse convincing to himself (except God who doesn't speak in modern times), and the Japanese—they have gone even to the limit of offering to send us rice. We might try and blame the twin evils of war and inflation, the moral and economic chaos resulting from them, the shutting off of sources, and the inevitable hoarding, corruption and profiteering that are bound to arise in a state of short supply. But the war was not of our making and we were dragged into it without even

a 'by your leave'. We might blame the absence of a popular, democratic, national Government at the Centre and in the Provinces to manage the country's war-time problems and economy, but the men and women who mattered were thrown into prison long before the Bengal famine took material shape. The question as to who is to blame for the famine cannot be answered in a convenient and brief manner and no one individual can be pilloried as its sole author. Linlithgow and his New Delhi subordinates who were in one way or another connected with the food administration of the country, members of the Fazlul Huq and the Nazimuddin Ministries, big hoarders and small hoarders, greedy black-marketeers and profiteers, and chiefly Leopold Amery who, by virtue of the office he holds, symbolises Britain's political and economic domination of this country, each one of these known and unknown men is responsible in greater or lesser degree for the stupendous tragedy we witnessed the other day and, if fears are not liars, may witness again.

Famine is not an inevitable resultant of war. Britain, America, Russia, China, Canada, Australia, South Africa, they are all at war, and some of them have been waging war on their own soil for years. In none of them has there been a famine. Even in China the Honan famine was a natural one, and in magnitude it is not comparable to the Bengal tragedy. The war no doubt helped to precipitate the famine in Bengal. It was not the sole cause of it. It was not an act of God as Amery would have us believe. It was the result of bunglings of men. And Amery, as the man

most chiefly responsible for the governance and welfare of the people of this country, must shoulder a major part of the blame for this colossal tragedy and not ease his conscience by passing on the burden to his Creator. God's shoulders are broad enough to bear man's burdens, but man, in an effort to avoid confessing his sins, must not try to make God a sinner. Otherwise, the idea and institution of God will cease to have a meaning to man.

Amery had no need to blame God. He could have said that India, by right of conquest, was Britain's estate and, if he, as the estate's Chief Manager, involved in suffering those who dwelt on it in order to beat Hitler and Tojo, nobody had any right to question. That would have been honest.

Less than five months before the famine had begun claiming its first victims, Amery assured his colleagues in the House of Commons that there would be no famine in India. He attributed any apparent shortages to hoarding. He expressed the view that matters relating to price control and other allied subjects were within the jurisdiction of the Government of India and it would be unwise to interfere with the latter's discretion. Note the first signs of the washing of guilty hands. Three days later Member of Parliament Sorensen warned Amery of actual or potential human peril that might occur in India. This was in January 1943.

While many liberal minds in Britain were growing anxious about the Indian food situation, men of Amery's way of thinking were com-

placently congratulating themselves that they had saved India from hunger. On the 21st of May 1943, at the Conservative Conference in London, Captain Godfrey Nicholson moving a resolution on India said, "The next part of the motion is the recognition that we are trustees not only for the happiness but even for the continued survival of 380 million of our fellow-men and women that depend upon the maintenance of ordered liberty without which victory is unattainable." He added, *"We have rescued India from misery and hunger."*

In May 1943, hunger-stricken people from Bengal's villages had begun the trek to their neighbouring towns.

For weeks after hunger-victims had dropped dead on Calcutta's streets, the world outside India was not allowed to know the whole truth. News despatches to foreign papers were censored and the word "famine" was at first feared as conveying information of vital military importance to the enemy. But men and women from India travelled to Britain and America every day. Soldiers sent gifts wrapped in old newspapers and the censors scarcely noticed the pictures they contained. As the truth became known, the stops on famine news were removed and the world woke up to the unpleasant horrors of the Bengal famine.

Late in September 1943, Amery admitted the seriousness of the situation but tried to throw the responsibility for the muddle on the Bengal Ministry. He said, "The Government of Bengal is a Government of Indian Ministers responsible to the local Legislature and is statutorily respon-

sible for the food administration." He also said that local administrative failure was one of the causes of the food crisis.

Amery's attempt to fix the blame on the Provincial Government (he didn't accuse New Delhi at any time) evoked loud protests in India as well as in England. Former Madras Inspector-General of Police Sir Charles Cunningham said, "The fact that India was faced with absolute shortage of staple food when Burma was lost was known. Since then Indian responsible authorities have been jibbing at the plain requirements of the situation which have been progressively deteriorating. *The Indian Constitution provides adequately for intervention and the British people cannot escape responsibility to history for what may happen.*"

Amery returned to his theme of blaming the Provincial Government in the second statement he made on the Bengal food situation. On the 12th of October 1943, he said, "The Bengal Government are responsible to the Bengal Legislature for the administration of the province including the feeding of the people faced with a poor harvest in 1942-43." Next he threatened the Ministry with intervention, if the situation was not remedied with whatever assistance it was possible for New Delhi and London to render.

Three days later speaking in Birmingham, the India Secretary described how under the beneficent rule of Britain the population of India had grown by 50 million more between 1931 and 1941, but this meant that every month India had to feed an additional 400,000 mouths. The war

and the working of Provincial Autonomy were added factors contributing to the situation, he added. He mentioned the loss of Burma and said that cultivators and traders hoarded in a rising market. He congratulated the Centre on having confined the famine to certain areas instead of letting it sweep over the entire country. Then with an oratorical flourish he asked what Britain's responsibilities were and proceeded to supply his own answer. He held that Parliament was conscious of its ultimate responsibility for the welfare of India and in recognition of that they had released shipping to import food into India. But he added a rider that waging the war was of even greater importance and that foodships could be released only when they did not come in the way of war needs. With that rider, India had no hope of getting adequate succour. Later, he was to release shipping for carrying whisky and toilet goods to India. He would not see that with a famished India the war in the East would be prolonged and that food to the starving was a vital munition of war.

Towards the end of October 1943, the House of Lords debated the Bengal famine situation. Lord Huntingdon (Labour) suggested political concessions and added that the security of the Pacific front and humanitarian reasons demanded large imports of food into India. Lord Hailey chastised the Punjab for its non-co-operative attitude, pointed out the dangers of Pakistan, stressed the importance of a strong Centre and the need for a strong, competent and reliable executive, and contributed little else to the discussion.

Lord Strabolgi, after congratulating Lord Hailey on his masterly defence of Government's inaction, contended that India was never self-sufficient in food and that huge quantities had been exported to the Middle East to feed the Army. He referred to the fatal disease of bureaucracy—procrastination,—and thanked heaven that Wavell had arrived in India to take charge of the mess.

Under-Secretary Lord Munster, replying on behalf of Government, tried to reason away the famine but admitted that it was partially at least man-made. He said, "Should anything occur to disturb the normal flow of trade between the small subsistence farmer and the great urban population a man-made artificial famine is at once created, a famine quite distinct in every way from that caused by the failure of crops over which mankind has little or no control. At the moment Bengal is enduring both forms of disaster—man-made and natural." Turning to the question of responsibilities, Munster, like Amery, laid it first at the door of the Provincial Government and said the Centre could not be expected to intervene unless things went so badly in a province that the general war effort stood in danger. Munster did not admit that the famine was such an emergency which would justify intervention.

The storm over the food question blew more violently in the House of Commons. Frederick Pethick Lawrence opening the debate first made the point that Parliament was ultimately responsible for the famine and added that their officials in India and Britain were directly responsible for the main causes of the trouble. And the main

cause of trouble, according to him, was inflation, for which the Provincial Government were certainly not responsible. He referred to the enormous rise in prices (ranging from 300 to 700 per cent above normal) and asked whether wages had risen in proportion. Referring to the care with which inflationary tendencies in Britain have been checked, he remarked, "But the Government of India have not taken the same care regarding inflation that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has taken in Britain." Pethick Lawrence perhaps did not know that decisions vitally bearing on inflation in India were taken at the very highest level and that New Delhi was not so guilty as London. Regarding remedies, he suggested large imports of grains into India, subsidies to cultivators and finally opined that the result of the famine might be equivalent to a military defeat.

In this connection, it is worth recalling an earlier comment made by *The Economist*. It wrote, "... the fundamental influence in the Indian price situation has been the degree to which the crudest inflationary finance has provided the counterpart to India's real contribution to the war in terms of goods and services." No neater analysis of one of the root causes behind the famine could have been made.

Amery, speaking early in the debate, began as usual by describing the benefits conferred on India by British rule and dwelt for a while on the growing pressure on the land due to the rapid growth of population, but admitted that agricultural production had not made similar progress. Next he turned to the question of inflation,

mentioned the inadequacy of consumer goods to absorb the extra currency in circulation, and pointed out how rising prices for agricultural produce and anxiety about an uncertain future had led to hoarding by cultivators. He persisted in tracing the fault to maldistribution rather than to an overall shortage. At this stage, Amery offered his congratulations to the New Delhi Government and its ex-Chief, Linlithgow, on having saved nearly three-fourths of India from the famine. He then described the relief measures in operation, paid a well-deserved tribute to Wavell, Auchinleck and the Army and passed on to the subject of shipping. His refrain on this subject continued to be the same, "Arms before Food".

Former Finance Member of the Government of India Sir George Schuster refused, however, to blame the Indian peasant for hoarding and asked what he was given to induce him to part with his grain. He slashed at Amery for having kept Parliament in the dark and said that the responsibility which rested in London had not been fullly discharged. He felt Amery personally had a heavy responsibility to the House in the matter and that he had not fully discharged it.

But former Bengal Governor Sir John Anderson was irritated that members of the House should try to fix the guilt on this and that member of Government. Without adding anything to the debate he contented himself by saying that food-ships would be sent to India till the end of 1943 (what tonnage would be sent he did not say) and that he believed India had seen the peak of inflationary tendencies.

So ended the great famine debate in the Commons. Indian newspapers frontpaged it and many half-fed thousands devoured the printed words as if those could appease the hunger of the nation. Few of them knew that only 35 members out of the 600 odd members of the House sat through the debate. What cared the rest about the Indian famine? They were themselves famished; it was lunch-hour and eating a well-cooked lunch was infinitely more satisfying than listening to nice phrases that meant precisely nothing.

If Parliament and the India office, as the arbiters of the destiny of this country, failed to discharge their responsibilities by preventing in good time a famine in India, they equally failed to show willingness to send real help to mitigate the blow and ward off any that might arise. Nothing else could have helped so much as food shipments to restore confidence and bring down prices and relieve shortage. Next to food, import of plant to make consumer goods would have helped. Some 30,000 tons of wheat were reported to have arrived by the middle of November. At that rate—and there was no assurance that even this would be kept up after the year was over—India could not hope to get much more than 400,000 tons of wheat in a year, half of Calcutta's annual consumption. A million capsules of halibut liver oil are good; a million pounds of condensed milk are even better; a million tons of wheat would have been the best guarantee against any future disaster.

The debate in the Commons, though it did not throw much light, roused a lot of heat in England

and India. Labour Member W. C. Cove thoroughly angry said, "If there is personal responsibility in this situation, it lies heavily on the shoulders of the late Viceroy and Mr. Amery, and both of them ought to be indicted publicly for what has happened. It is not so many months ago that Mr. Amery assured the House of Commons that there was no need to fear the Indian food situation. Not long after, famine stalks India." Proceeding, Cove underlined the key problem of India and said, "The real problem is not over-population, but the fact that there is an alien Government governing India . . . and there is only one way of solving it and that is by recognising now in practice the right of India to self-government, self-determination and independence." Hot words these, sincere words and fine words—but they buttered no parsnips. The leaders of India continued to rot in gaol and the people to rot in the countryside.

Though hot words about India, by whomsoever they are uttered, usually mean nothing, nevertheless when they are sounded in England they are at times a danger signal. Amery had therefore to find somebody to answer for the famine—somebody whom no one could question—and early in December he discovered such a person in God and invited Him to bear the burden. In a press interview in London he emphasised that "the Bengal famine was primarily an act of God and the immediate cause of the famine was wholly an unforeseen failure of the local rice crop due to blight which was unfortunately discovered tardily through unforeseeable technical reasons."

Amery's attempts to implicate God did not, however, bring him much comfort. Speaking in his own constituency, Birmingham, Amery held out the hope that "Bengal was turning the corner as far as food was concerned but there was new and serious anxiety about disease which had followed the famine." The meeting was not disposed to give Amery a quiet hearing. His constituents had had enough of this man who had bungled in India so badly that he had embittered a whole nation. Boos, catcalls, jeers and shouts punctuated his pauses. Pandemonium broke loose as the police tried to remove the disturbers. Amery begged and pleaded for a patient hearing, but they would have none of him. The interrupters shouted, "We have given you twenty years. The trouble is we are too patient." Earlier, the Executive Committee of the Transport and General Workers' Unions had passed a resolution demanding Amery's exit. The War Cabinet, by nothing moved, still kept Amery in.

9

NOTES OF WARNING

The forward vision to see clearly coming events is given to poets and prophets, to saints and a few statesmen. Tennyson foresaw a time when aerial armadas would darken the skies and, I am told, Nostradamus predicted the present war. I do not know if any poet or prophet, saint or statesman foresaw the Bengal famine, except perhaps one who hinted at what might happen. India's statesman-saint, Mahatma Gandhi, warned his countrymen and their rulers in the first issue of the resumed *Harijan* on the 18th of January 1942. He wrote, "There are questions which confront war-resisters as much as they confront war-mongers. And they can be decided only one way by both, thought the approach may vary. Such are questions of dealing with scarcity of food and clothing, looting and bread-riots etc." A little later, in the same article, he said, "Mere Government effort cannot deal with crises affecting millions of people, unless there is voluntary response from them." Finally he advised, "Every village has to become a self-sufficient republic."

A week later in the next issue of *The Harijan* Gandhiji returned to his theme and, instructing Congressmen to do constructive work to prevent the coming evils, wrote, "There is already scarcity in the land both of food and clothing. As the war

progresses, both the scarcities must increase. There are no imports from outside, either of food-stuffs or of cloth. The well-to-do may not feel the pinch as yet or at all, but the poor are feeling it now. The well-to-do live on the poor. There is no other way. What is then their duty? He who saves gains as much, that is to say he produces as much. Hence those who feel for the poor, those who would be one with them, must curtail their wants." Gandhiji thus launched a campaign against waste and urged the peasants to grow more food, and warned grain-dealers to play fair. The Government of India had not even thought of their "Grow More Food" campaign at the time Gandhiji wrote those words.

A week later still, India's No. 2 leader and Gandhiji's chosen heir, Jawaharlal Nehru, sounded a note of warning at Gorakhpur about the insufficiency of food in this country. Six weeks afterwards, at a meeting in Allahabad, Nehru spoke again on the importance of assuring the country of sufficient food, if orderly administration was to be maintained. This is what he said, "The economic crisis will inevitably deepen as the war goes on and it is essential that a planned and a carefully-thought-out approach be made to the problem of food-supply. This requires state action as well as widespread public effort. We cannot just wait for events to happen." Well, the Government of India and the various Provincial Governments (remember, there was not one Congress Government among them) waited, tinkered at the problem, imposed and removed controls over movements, fixed and unfixed prices, and all the time

just jibbed, until events did happen in Bengal, Orissa and Malabar. Nehru advocated at the same meeting, crop-planning, licensing of grain-dealers, fixation of agricultural wholesale and retail prices and thorough inspection of all measures put into execution. He suggested the creation of self-sufficient food areas, growing more food and the purchase of only surplus stocks.

At the same time as Nehru was talking in Allahabad, Britain's Minister for Agriculture Robert Hudson was speaking in England reviewing the progress of his country's agriculture since the beginning of the war. He reported a 33 per cent increase in Britain's wheat acreage and said the 1942 crop was planned two years ago in 1940. He mentioned that more and more Italian prisoners in Britain were being used for agricultural work, and appealed to his fellow-countrymen to "dig for life". India's Member for Lands, who, with what rhyme or reason I do not know has also to look after her Education and Health (it was insurance magnate Nalini Ranjan Sarker then) had no such encouraging news to give to his countrymen as Robert Hudson had to give to his. The newspapers did not miss the contrast. *The Hindu* remarking editorially on Hudson's speech wrote, "We must begin betimes the hard struggle for self-sufficiency in the matter of food as we have ten mouths to feed for every one that Britain has."

In the middle of 1942, in June, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, addressing the 6th Gorakhpur District Political Conference, also stressed on the need for growing more food. By then the situation had so deteriorated that Gandhiji had again to appeal

against wasting food. In *The Harijan* of the 2nd of July 1942, writing on the difficulty experienced in obtaining foodgrains at controlled prices, Gandhiji said, "The Government no doubt are most answerable for this state of things. They have sent out grain and they do not know how to deal with the stock there is in the country. Prices must be regulated and there must be grain offices like post offices where people can buy grain like stamps. The people cannot starve while the Government are learning wisdom." After appealing to the grain merchants to do their duty by the people, Gandhiji went on, "The matter brooks no delay. Hunger knows no law, and bread or rather grain riots are sure to break out over the country if energetic and benevolent measures are not taken in time."

This great and wise man, who loved his people so much that he saw distinctly the troubles inevitably coming on them in the not far distant future, was clapped into prison on the 9th of August 1942, and from then on his sage counsel was denied to his people. Every piece of advice he gave was ignored both by the Government and the people. India's villages, which gradually had ceased to be self-sufficient republics during 150 years of British rule, under the stress of war suffered acutely on account of their dependence on areas far away. With a little imagination, with careful planning and with proper direction and with a gesture of goodwill, which might have won for Government the people's co-operation, each village in India could have been made more or less self-sufficing. But neither the Central nor the

Provincial Governments had their hands on the pulse of the people. They did not know its beats were faint with hunger as Gandhiji did. The demand that only surplus stocks should be removed from any area was entirely ignored. Grain dealers were licensed in a most haphazard manner that will not stand an inquiry, and, with inflated money and the power to frighten the cultivators, they were let loose in the markets to purchase as they pleased. Again, there was no crop-planning worth the name. In fact, in spite of vigorous protests from the public, the jute acreage in Bengal was not reduced.

Gandhiji charged Government with incompetence and accused them of sending grain out of the country. The charge was true. They sent out grain to Iran, Iraq, Arabia, the Middle East and South Africa and, of course, to Ceylon. None of these countries has been grateful enough, either to the Indian soldiers for defending them from the Axis, or to the Indian people for helping them with foodstuffs at tremendous sacrifice. Gandhiji charged Government with not knowing how to handle the stocks of foodstuffs that there were in the country. The charge was true then. It is no less true now. There were just sufficient stocks throughout the country in 1943, which, if they could have been taken in hand and distributed equitably, would have staved off the famine until imports from abroad could have eased the situation. Gandhiji said the people could not starve while Government were learning wisdom. There he was mistaken. The fact was that they did and several hundreds of thousands of them died in

silence while Government were tardily learning how to tackle the problem of food for all.

Government's past handling of the food situation was a black record of folly after folly. Had you been round Bengal, to Munshiganj, Bhola, Chandpur, Dacca, Barisal, Faridpur, Contai and Tamluk in the last three months of 1943 you could have seen for yourself the misery there was. The famine was then at its worst; and when you read this book in 1944 you will perhaps say things could not have been so bad as all that. Well, read the newspaper reports of the period. You may go round the areas I have mentioned even in 1944 and, if luckily by then the famine is under control, even then you will be able to see the terrible marks it has left on the people.

The Government of India, of course, would not listen to Gandhiji. His people may regard him as their saviour, but Government have always regarded him as a most seditious person. So, how could they heed his advice, even if it were for their good? They were so blind, however, that they would not even listen to the warnings of Indian businessmen, who right from the beginning of the war had been consistently helping the war effort of the Government. Sir Chunilal Mehta, addressing the annual meeting of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce in New Delhi on the 7th of March 1942, urged Government to inaugurate a vigorous food production drive. He wanted them "(1) to explore ways and means of inducing the cultivators to increase the area under foodgrains and fodder crops; (2) to launch vigorous propaganda in the countryside to persuade the

cultivators to grow more foodgrains and fodder crops as agreed upon; (3) to examine and provide adequate facilities for storing reasonable quantities of foodstuffs; and (4) to see how far regional self-sufficiency in respect of foodstuffs as between different areas could be attained as a safeguard against interruption in the transport system." He advised immediate action before the monsoon set in. He asked for a Production Executive consisting of representatives of the Agricultural and Marketing Departments of the Government of India, of the Provincial Governments and of the Indian States. He warned Government against asking a people in a chronic state of under-consumption of even the most elementary necessities of life further to curtail or postpone their consumption.

Sir Chunilal's helpful suggestions went the way of most non-official suggestions in this country. They went unheard by the powers that held the reins of Government.

The next day Sir Purushottamdas Thakurdas, the Bombay cotton magnate, also speaking in New Delhi on the importance of producing more food and conserving it, expressed his opinion that there were not sufficient stocks of foodgrains in this country to meet the needs of her vast population. Referring to the export of foodstuffs to feed the Indian Army overseas and distressed people in the nearby Allied countries, Sir Purushottamdas said, "No Indian would mind this, but the Federation should protest strongly against the policy of allowing the children of the soil to starve to enable people outside to have a banquet. We

want to do our best to help the civil population of an Allied country, but not at the expense of our own civil population which is not vocal."

Well, what was one more businessman crying hoarse over the same theme? In India everybody was an alarmist always warning Government of this or that impending calamily and anxious to create trouble where there was none. It was better not to listen to them.

If the Government of India were blind, the Government of Bengal were even blinder to the danger descending on their people. In 1942, thousands of country-boats were put out of commission, considerable stretches of coastal areas were evacuated, Burma fell, lakhs of refugees flocked into the province, and later on the October cyclone destroyed a million and half tons of rice. In the face of these certain pointers to calamity, the Bengal Government slept. One of the officers of the Bengal Government, K. A. L. Hill, then Secretary to the Department of Agriculture and Industries, warned as early as in April 1942 that the province might have to face heavy deficits in rice, gram, dal and mustard-oil. No one bothered since the price of rice then, as I have said earlier, was only Rs. 5 a maund.

But as the year advanced, the strain on Bengal's rice stocks began to increase and prices rose to Rs. 8 a maund by September and stood at Rs. 10 a maund by the end of 1942. Even after the *aman* crop of 1942-43 had come into the market, prices rose steadily from month to month. That was an indication of shortage, and it must have been obvious to anybody that, unless very

extensive and stringent measures were taken immediately to control supplies, prices and distribution, a famine would soon be sweeping over Bengal. Bengal's rice-prices graph, since September 1942, was one steep upward line of warning of the coming disaster.

The notes of warning sounded by Gandhiji, Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Sir Chunilal Mehta, Sir Purushottamdas Thakurdas, by the Press and by the public, and by others too numerous to mention, were warnings sounded in good time. They were given at a time when things had not gone out of hand and while there was yet hope of averting trouble. From the beginning of 1943, however, the food situation in Bengal began to worsen rapidly, so rapidly in fact that any plans that the Government made to meet the situation became out-of-date by the time they could be put in action. The problem, by the quick turns and strides it took, confounded the vision of the Government. Even the public had no very clear ideas as to how a solution was to be found. The Bengal Government, as Governments elsewhere in India, were two paces behind public opinion, and public opinion in Bengal unfortunately was two paces behind the famine.

A catastrophe such as a famine does not have a definite date of origin. The roots are deep and many. As it takes shape its movements are slow at the beginning. It is unlike an earth-quake or a tidal wave which arises suddenly to destroy in a few seconds or minutes vast numbers of people. A famine is predictable and, therefore, preventible. It casts its shadows long before, and at first the

shadows darken imperceptibly. With its every movement towards its climax, the shadows become blacker and blacker. The shadows of the Bengal famine were long and light in 1942. Since the beginning of 1943 they began to darken and, as the months advanced, the shadows grew darker and darker until in July they merged into a terrible form which was recognised to be that of a dangerous, long-lasting famine.

THE CURTAIN GOES UP

The nine chapters in this section were written during October, November and December of 1943. By the time this book is in your hands, the Bengal famine is certain to have changed its contour and complexion in many ways; and my observations may no longer faithfully reflect the prevailing conditions. To two chapters I could add postscripts before the manuscript went off to the printer; the others were not altered in any way. In fact, therefore, they present a series of arrested pictures of the famine as it developed in those months.

10

CALCUTTA : THE DESTITUTES, OCTOBER 1943

I arrived in Calcutta late one night in the last week of September 1943. I had been away for just over a year and was anxious to get back. Calcutta meant and means a good lot to me; interesting work, interesting people and loyal and devoted friends. It is a city with a personality. Life there doesn't flow so uncomfortably fast as in Bombay, nor is it so comfortably smug as in New Delhi. There is a time to work and a time to play in Calcutta. After seven or eight hours of devilling in office or factory, you will see Calcutta folk taking the air near the lakes or on the *maidan* or playing with children in the city's numerous parks. I have always known it to be a pleasant city. Calcutta, like any other great, industrial city, had its slums, its wretched poor, its pavement-dwellers and its beggars. But they were not a starved lot. Some of the beggars, in fact, used to do better than many slum-dwellers. I knew personally a few of them. One, a lame fellow, who used to park himself near my office, had always a smile for me and regularly used to earn his day's pice. The small-change scarcity hurt him a bit, but he used to carry on. Another was a blind youngster whose usual station was at the junction of Russa Road and Rash Behari Avenue. He

would regularly repeat his piece every time the tramcars stopped there. His daily haul must have been pretty tidy. In September, when I returned, I looked for these two. They were there, but they were *not* alone.

Calcutta's pavements were littered with thousands of beggars—not professionals—in every stage of decripitude. Some were dead, others were dying and all were very starved. September passed into October and the pavements became even more crowded with these miserable people. The dead among them were the luckiest. They didn't have to cry any longer for food. It was the living, who were slowly dying, that wailed and wept for a morsel to eat. Many of them had not long to live. The meal of gruel they got was neither nourishing nor plentiful. Ten weeks of malnutrition, wandering in search of food, anxiety and fear, exposure to sun and rain and all manner of infection, had reduced them to mere skin and bone. They were a shocking sight. You saw so many of them, wherever you went in this vast city, that your heart in sheer self-defence hardened and your feelings refused to register any longer their suffering.

It was not the Calcutta I used to know. It was a foul city in those months. A hundred and fifty thousand starving, unwashed men, women and children, squatting and sleeping wherever they could, dirtying the area around and clad in rags, they were not a pretty sight. Emaciated mothers, with dull, bleary, yellow eyes from which the light of life was nearly gone, upsetting garbage cans to recover a bit of vegetable, fish or flesh to feed their

children with, that was not a pretty sight. Babies, vainly suckling dry, withered breasts, were not a pretty sight either. Children with spindly legs and bloated stomachs were not a pretty sight. It was wretched to see men and women, once strong and sturdy, twisted and bent by hunger, with their ribs showing and their bones sticking out of their withered and wrinkled skins. It was tragic to look into the eyes of those famine-victims that had a hunted, hopeless look in them, that had a numbed, hungry look in them. No, Calcutta was a foul place in those days.

Much sympathy was wasted on the dead. One Bengal Minister said he mourned their death in reverence. They didn't stand much in need of that. They wanted food and shelter while they were alive. They died for lack of both of them. Even after their death, a number of them received scurvy treatment. They had to lie in queues and rot in Nimtolla Ghat before they could get away from a world in which they had experienced so much pain and misery. By the end of October, 6,500 had died in Calcutta alone of hunger, and disease following hunger. Many hundreds more were similarly predestined to perish. None of them deserved to die that way. Two months, three months before they died, they were sturdy, healthy men and women who toiled on the land and raised food for the people who let them starve.

The people who were dying of starvation in well-stocked Calcutta were not, in the main, Calcutta people. A great majority of them was landless labourers from the neighbouring districts

of 24 Parganas, Hooghly and Midnapore. Their trek towards Calcutta in the hope of getting food began early in July, and since then an increasing number of hungry folk poured into the city till the end of October. Some of them came in entire family groups, some were husbands who had deserted their wives and children, some were wives who had been turned out by husbands and some were boys and girls who had strayed away from their parents. Those destitutes were not beggars as sometimes alleged. A Calcutta University survey showed that only six per cent of them were professional beggars.

The destitutes poured into Calcutta by road and rail. They came on the roofs of rail carriages and a number hung on to door handles. There was not an inch of unfilled space inside the compartments. Most of them spilled out at Ballygunge railway station, and it was there you saw the largest number of the famine's victims. One day in October I went to the eastern end of Rash Behari Avenue to see how things were going. An old woman lay dying near the railway station. She was breathing with difficulty and was unconscious. Flies had settled on her half-closed eyes, nose and mouth. Her thin body, on which the skin hung like a loose jacket, was almost naked. Hundreds of people passed by her. Not one cared enough to telephone for an ambulance. Before the ambulance I asked for came she was gone. They sent later a C. D. L. (Corpse Disposal Lorry) to take her body away.

Not far away, on the same road, another person, a man, lay dead. His mouth was slightly

open, with some of his teeth showing. His eyes, too, were half-open. He must have died at night. He had fresh bandages on one leg. He appeared to have been discharged recently from one of Calcutta's sick-destitutes' hospitals. His body though thin was big-boned. He had the looks of a peasant. Before he was caught by the famine, he should have been a fairly well-fed man, working on the land in some remote village raising corn from the good earth and rearing a family. He lay dead, his wanderings at an end. The sun and moon would shine no more for him, and for him "the lights of the stars were dead".

In the nearby open spaces adjoining the rail station, I saw little collections of wretched humanity. There were brittle babies a few days old who had opened their eyes in a famine-stricken world. They had starved in their mothers' wombs and had not much life left in them when first they drew the breath of life. There were other children, a little older, with shrunken shanks, their thigh-bones sticking out of their once-well-cushioned buttocks. Other children there were who had cried their eyes dry for a little food, and, faint with the effort, they were lying in the sun.

Famine is hard especially on children. They are born with very little reserves of strength. They get little food in this country to build up their growing bones. Stunted at birth, they remain stunted throughout their lives. When starvation is followed by disease, they die quickly without a struggle. Those that manage to survive are a heavy burden on the nation. They debilitate the race. Millions of children in Bengal have been

cruelly stunted by the famine and the toll they are going to exact on the future is terrible to contemplate. Twenty years hence they will breed a feebler generation. In the years to come, their revenge on a society which failed to care for them adequately in the present will be a bitter one indeed.

The starving mothers who tried to nurse their children were even more tragic a sight. They had no milk in their dry breasts. They had no other baby food. Forgetting their own hunger, they wanted desperately to feed their little ones. Even in a famine mother-love did not easily disappear. True, I saw a number of abandoned children, but rarely abandoned babies. If any there were, they were mostly orphans. The desperate cry of these mothers I heard was one which I could never again bear to hear. When you heard it, it sent a long, harsh shock along your nerves and you felt as if you were held and crushed underneath some immense weight of rock. You felt that you would have paid gladly any price to have prevented this tragedy and that in the end it would have been far cheaper to have done so.

Most of these destitutes had been in Calcutta since July or August and, since they were proving a menace to the city's health, some measures were being taken to keep them alive. One free meal of gruel or *kichuri* a day was served out to some eighty per cent of the destitutes. This type of relief was not directly organised by the Government, though they helped by providing grain at subsidised prices to the free kitchens. The Government also lent the use of some of their

A. R. P. kitchens, staff and transport. They provided a supervising staff to help advise and run several relief centres. The main burden of relief in the city, however, was shouldered by public organisations which provided the required men and the money. Among the organisations carrying on relief on a big scale were the Bengal Central Relief Committee, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Marwari Relief Committee, the Calcutta Relief Committee, the All-India Women's Conference, the Ramkrishna Mission, the Bharat Sevashram, the Friends' Ambulance Unit and the Rotary Club, Numerous other organisations and individuals were also affording relief to cover the needs of their immediate areas.

At the beginning, anybody was free to start a kitchen wherever he liked and issue whatever type of food he thought was best or could afford. Later, with the appointment of a city relief officer, matters improved and control was exercised on the location of feeding centres. Cooking and distribution arangements also improved.

When the first relief measures were organised, Calcutta got most of the attention as it was naturally more vocal and the distress of the destitutes who had flocked into the city was something which the city folk had never seen before. The interior areas got very little attention in the early stages of the famine though their distress was really far greater. Few newspaper men went about those areas in those months and the world outside the interior districts had no clear picture of the grim situation. Pictures of the famished in Calcutta appeared in the Press and visiting

ladies and gentlemen obliged the newsmen with graphic descriptions of what they had seen. But none of them really gave any faithful picture of the tragedy. I don't claim I shall be able to give one. The tragedy of a people reduced to beggary completely beggared any attempt at a realistic description. One had to see the tragedy. A motion picture might have done more justice. None of the pictures of the famine tragedy you had seen or read was in any sense a piece of over-dramatisation as Home Secretary Conran-Smith would have you believe. He was never here in those days.

Calcutta with its free kitchens attracted large numbers of destitutes from the surrounding rural areas. If kitchens had been opened near their villages, they would not have trekked the distance to Calcutta. They would have stayed at home, kept up their family life in tact and would have been better able to preserve their health. As more and more rural kitchens began to function in October, the destitute crowds in the city began to thin and in November they were forced out of the city altogether by an ordinance. Calcutta got rid of the famine and a couple of foreign correspondents in the city cabled their papers that the famine was over.

Let me take you round a typical gruel kitchen. One was an A.R.P. kitchen on Lansdowne Road. Its cooks prepared food for 3,000 destitutes a day. They made three types of gruel. One was the "Standard Gruel", the composition of which was prescribed by the Government. This was the type of gruel that must normally be issued

by non-official free kitchens, if they were to receive from the Government the benefit of subsidised grain. The second was a special gruel which contained more vegetable and a quantity of biscuit powder. The third was *kichuri* which was a meal mainly composed of rice and dal with some vegetable and a dash of mustard oil. The standard gruel consisted of equal quantities of rice, dal, bajra and jowar, together with a little vegetable, oil and spice. The ingredients were cooked separately in huge cauldrons and then mixed. Three cigarette-tinfuls of this composition were doled out to each destitute. The calorific value of this meal was 750 calories. The special gruel was more tasty and more digestible. The *kichuri* was tastier than both and quite easily digestible. Its calorific value, however, was not greater than that of the standard gruel.

The food cooked in the A.R.P. kitchen was purchased by different relief committees for distribution by them. The cost price of a meal of gruel worked out at about an anna and six pies. The *kichuri* cost somewhat more and was sold through cheap canteens at less-than-cost price.

The composition of the standard gruel and its suitability as food for the starving, whose digestive systems were badly deranged, were questions about which there were sharp differences of opinion between the public and the Government. It was contended on behalf of the Government that the calorific content of the meal was just about enough to keep a man alive if he performed no manual labour. Non-official medical opinion held the view that most of the destitutes were in an invalid state

and that standard gruel doled out in the standard quantity was not an adequate diet at all. They pointed out that invalid hospital diet contained around 2,500 calories and was far more easily digestible. The same destitutes when they got into a hospital received better food and they deserved just as good a meal while they were on the roads. The one meal the destitutes were getting was a sub-subsistence meal. It kept them alive, but it starved them out gradually. The meal was much below the standard prescribed in the famine code. The Government just didn't have the stocks on hand to give the destitutes a better meal. That was the real fact.

I tasted the pasty, yellowish stuff they called gruel, and found it to be insipid. I should dread to live on it day after day. I saw it doled out at a centre in Rash Behari Avenue round about noon. The gruel arrived in A.R.P. lorries and a band of volunteers unloaded the stuff and got ready to distribute it. About 1,200 men, women and children were fed daily at this centre. Their feeding time was around noon, as it was all over Calcutta. This was done to prevent destitutes from running to another centre and cadge for an extra meal and deprive somebody else equally as needy from getting his little share. The destitutes at this centre sat round in big circles. Men were on one side, nursing mothers with their children were on another, and women and children were elsewhere. Most of them had containers of some sort to receive their gruel in; some had earthern pots and pans, some had rusty enamel plates, some had tin cans and a few who did not

have any kind of receptacle spread out one end of their *dhothies* or *sarees* to receive their gruel.

The volunteers, young men and women from the locality, kept the destitutes in order and first issued milk and barley water to children and nursing mothers and then dished out the gruel. What was served was eaten up with avidity to the last particle. And at the end, for what was left, there was a bit of a struggle, the destitutes falling on one another to get near the big containers. The milk was a gift of the Army.

Most relief centres in Calcutta had adopted a ticket system by which they ensured that the same person got a meal every day. The number of tickets corresponded to the number of meals they could afford to issue, and invariably a small number of no-ticket holders turned up at the centres in the hope of getting the left-over stuff. Small fights ensued among them for getting a share of the gruel, but since they didn't possess much strength not much damage was done.

In the cheap canteens a little over a *seer* of *kichuri* was sold for two annas. Working class people, who did not come under any cheap food-grain scheme run by their employers and who could not afford to buy their food from the black market, and lower middle class people were the people who benefited most from these canteens. The meal they bought was worth much more than two annas, and it was a great help to them. The Government aided these canteens by providing them with grain at controlled rates.

At another centre run by a local Communist group with public support, I saw *bustee* children

being fed on *kichuri*. They paid two pice each for a meal. This token payment helped their parents to preserve their self-respect. The meal the children got was good and plentiful and cost a good deal more than two pice.

The destitutes needed more than just one inadequate meal a day. They badly needed shelter. Those of them affected by infectious diseases needed to be isolated. Most of them were in urgent need of clothes. They wanted to be repatriated to their villages, but first wanted an assurance of food there. A great majority of them who were not beggars at all were fast learning the beggar mentality, and it was going to be a difficult job to set them to honest and hard work again.

By the middle of November, Calcutta was cleared of most of the destitutes. A few went away by themselves because the coming harvest was a good one. Some more left because they had heard that free kitchens had been opened in their villages. Quite a number were forcibly seized, packed into open lorries and, as they were wailing and weeping, were driven through Calcutta for all to see to destitutes' camps outside. The Government, as was to be expected, showed little imagination in bundling these folk out of the city. Mothers were separated from children, young women from their husbands and parents, wives from husbands, and a good deal of needless misery was inflicted on these already afflicted people. Wild panic caught the rest of the destitutes who were not roped in, in the first few days, and great numbers of them fled by themselves back to where they came from perhaps to suffer again. The famine

was driven out of Calcutta. But the problems of the destitutes still remained; only they were not publicised so much as before.

A word in passing about hospital arrangements made for the destitutes in Calcutta. It was not till they were in the last stage of collapse that many were removed to hospital. That was why the deathrate was so high, something over 35 per cent. There was no inspection service to pick up urgent cases from among the crowds. Usually, someone telephoned a non-official relief organisation or a hospital and then something was done. There was not sufficient accommodation in the destitutes' hospitals to look after all those who needed medical and nursing attention. So, many of the sick destitutes just died on the pavements. One of the hospitals I visited was full of starvation dysentery cases. The standard gruel had worked this havoc. They were a horrible sight and the stench was unbearable. By the standards of the Presidency General Hospital conditions in that hospital would be described as appalling. But it was one of the best for the unfortunate famine-stricken people, so I was informed. What happened to the destitutes that luckily got cured and were unfortunately discharged?—I asked the doctors. They did not know. Some of them might have gone to a regular destitutes' home. Many went out to begin their wanderings again.

11

CALCUTTA : CASE HISTORY, OCTOBER 1943

Famine is a killer. It kills particularly the poor and the weak. It kills children quickly. It kills them without giving them much of a chance. War is also a kiler. But its victims don't come from a particular class. You may be a banker's son and your fellow a farm-hand's son. Both of you stand an equal chance of being blown to bits by a bomb or shell. It is not like that in a famine. The banker's son will escape and the farm-hand's son will probably die. In a war the farm-hand's son has a chance of hitting back at the enemy. In a famine he has not a dog's chance of even barking back at the unseen enemy. There is no escape for him from starvation and slow death.

There is no grandeur in the tragedy of a famine as there may be in the tragedy of a war. When a man contends against fate with equal chance and is overcome by weaknesses inherent in his own character, then there is the theme for a grand tragedy. This is not the case, however, in a famine. It is an unseen foe whose origin and nature are unkown to the victim, and he succumbs for no discernible fault of his own. There is no grandeur in such a tale. There is only indescribable wretchedness.

I went about Calcutta in the last week of

October to hear from the famine-victims their tales of sorrow. Until I heard them speak, I could not realise what terrific human tragedies a famine could bring about in the lives of very ordinary people who, if they did not always live in plenty, led at least quiet, contented lives in their village homes. I will tell you what they told me.

I met Karthik Haldar, his wife and child, on the pavement near Asutosh College on Russa Road in South Calcutta. He came from Joynagar in 24 Parganas. He farmed two acres of land. Before the famine hit him in August he lived contentedly in his village with his wife, Subadhra Dasi, his baby daughter, Chabi, and his little son, Benoy. His mother and a brother also lived with him. From what the land gave him and from what he earned by occasional labour, Karthik carried on from year to year. Half the produce of his land went to the zamindar towards rent, and in a good year he got 15 maunds of paddy an acre. His last *aman* crop had failed. Insects had eaten it up and he got just 5 maunds from his two acres. It didn't last him very long and work was difficult to get. He managed somehow to stick to his village till August. After that he found there was absolutely no chance of his getting any food in his village. Then he left for Calcutta with Subhadra and Chabi. Karthik had never before in his life been to Calcutta, though he lived within thirty miles of the great city. He saw that some of his fellow-villagers were making for the city and he joined them. He came to Calcutta by train. He had no money and he and his family

travelled without tickets. When I met Karthik he had been in the city ten weeks. He told me he had never lived on charity before and was anxious to get back to reap the crop standing on his land. His cousins in the village, he said, were looking after his son and his land and in a week's time he would go. Karthik faced his troubles very philosophically and didn't cry over them. He looked thin and weak. He said he slept on footpaths and got his gruel from a neighbouring free kitchen. He didn't like the taste of it and he didn't get enough of it to satisfy his hunger. Only his will to live and his desire to get back kept him alive. I looked into Karthik's eyes and said good-bye. There was a deep sadness in them. His one *dhothi* was ragged and dirty. His wife and child were also in rags. She stood clutching her little bundle of odds and ends as I left her. She was very nervous and wondered why I had asked of her and her husband their story. She did not know that I asked them to tell me their story that I might tell it to you.

Next, I should like you to meet Narmada Dasi, a thin, short, shrivelled, fifty-year old woman with intelligent eyes. I chanced on her near Ballygunge railway station. She was quite a well-to-do person fifteen months ago when she had four acres of good land in Saugor Island, her husband and five children. Trouble came to her all of a sudden last October and the tidal wave that swept over Contai and Tamluk also swept away her husband and four of her children. They were working on their fields and were gone; she was at home and escaped. One of her sons, who was

away, was also saved. She used to call him Raj Kristo before tragedy came into her life; after that she named him '*Dukkha*'—sorrow. She could not stay in the village as she had no food; her crop was gone and her land lay fallow. She came to Calcutta in July with her son in search of food and she expected to go back in mid-November. Her relatives were looking after her land and she had heard the crop was good. Narmada Dasi lived in hope and with quiet courage was determined to get on top of her troubles. Her son lay ill with fever by her side on the pavement. She was lucky to have come to a gruel kitchen as that had kept her alive, though the poor quality of the food she got had considerably weakened her. Her home ruined, her future dark, Narmada Dasi, a poor lonely widow, spent her days and nights, on a stinking pavement in far-away Calcutta, an object of pity and charity.

Karthik and Narmada were still on the streets with their families and their little belongings. But Ananta Kumar Ghosh, whom I met next, lay in a destitutes' hospital, tossing up his feverish body on a thin straw mattress, his eyes red and protruding and a nasty cough frequently shaking his famished frame. He came of a respectable middle-class family. His father was a village physician in Faridpur district. His family consisted of two brothers and four step-brothers. He carried on a small business selling firewood. Three months ago his business fell off as his village became depopulated due to the famine, and Ananta Kumar made his way to Calcutta by foot, boat and rail with eight annas in his pocket. His

father had died and there was no food in his village. He starved in Calcutta for three days before somebody directed him to a free gruel kitchen. He lived for three months on the gruel he got, sleeping in parks and on pavements, getting weaker day by day. Finally, he could no longer stomach gruel and fell ill of starvation dysentery. He was picked up unconscious from the streets and taken to hospital. Ananta Kumar had read up to three classes below the matriculation standard, and had held a job in Calcutta three years before on Rs. 30 a month. He had never begged for his food in his life till the famine struck his village and drove him out of it. When I saw him in the hospital, he looked a man of forty and very tired. I asked him his age. He was twenty-four.

Ananta Kumar must have been a fine specimen of a man, tall, well-built and intelligent. Hunger had completely wrecked his health. I doubted whether he would ever again become healthy and strong and take his rightful place as a useful member of society. If he lived at all, he was certain to be a permanent liability to the nation.

In the same hospital I met young Abdur Rahman, a mere lad of seventeen. His joints were swollen with starvation oedema and he was in poor shape. He had been in the hospital for two months. His home was in Kulpi in the Diamond Harbour sub-division. His father was a *Maulavi* and a respected man of the village. Abdur Rahman himself was a matriculate and earned his

living by private teaching. Food became scarce in his village in June and a little later the famine struck the village so hard that several people died. His own mother, four sisters and a brother perished of hunger. As Abdur Rahman told me his sad story tears welled up in his eyes and for a while he remained silent absorbed in thought. It was difficult for me to persuade him to continue his story. Then he said he and his father decided to go to Calcutta to seek food and work. They left their village home with four rupees between them. Four rupees did not take them very far. They bought some *chattu* (gram flour) and lived on it for a fortnight, sleeping in a corner of an open verandah in a *bustee* area. When their money ran out, father and son starved for three days until they found their way to a free kitchen. The gruel they got was like water, said Abdur Rahman to me. They were not used to it and could not live on it for long. They fell ill. Father and son were sent to hospital by some kind-hearted A.R.P. men. The father got well soon and volunteered to work in the hospital. He stayed on for some time helping in the hospital kitchen. He then left to seek other work and Abdur Rahman did not know where he was. It was pathetic, the case of this lonely boy who was educated, spoke intelligently and wanted to be a teacher. Hunger had killed every one of his family except the father. When I asked him what he intended to do in the future, he looked at me helplessly and asked me to what future one like him could hope for. I was sorry I had asked him a difficult question. I could not give him a helpful answer. I paused

for a minute and then I glibly told him to get well first. Everything would be all right afterwards.

But would everything be all right for these castaways afterwards ? I wondered.

As I left the hospital, I met in the reception room a young convalescing woman. She was of slight build, with attractive shy eyes. Her name was Sankari Addy. Timely treatment had saved her. She was picked up on the Behala road faint with hunger. She told me she came from Buleshwar where her husband grew betel-vine on an acre of land. Flood and the famine that followed drove her and many of her village-people to leave their homes in search of food. For days together she and her husband starved. Fortunately they had no children. She was only eighteen, you see, and recently married. The husband decided to stay on the land to look after his coming betel-vine. The parting was not easy, but hunger was a difficult thing to face, with no food at home or in the village. So Sankari left for Calcutta and begged for food offering to work in middle-class homes. She carried on for two months like that and then her benefactors themselves were stricken and they could no longer give her any food. She found a gruel-kitchen and lived on gruel for a month more. She weakened gradually and, while wandering in search of better food, she fainted on the highway. When I found Sankari she was recovering very well and was helping the hospital staff. She told me she intended going back to her home in January when she hoped the present troubles would be over.

I have told you what Karthik, Narmada, Ananta Kumar, Abdur Rahman and Sankari told me. Every hunger-victim in Bengal must have some equally poignant tale to tell. If you have not personally witnessed a famine, you will not realise from newspaper reports of the time or even from this book what personal tragedies have been wrought by the Bengal famine; disease and death, separation, destitution, and utter hopelessness. You had to see for yourself the agonising sights and scenes of humanity being wrecked before your very eyes. Imagine yourself clinging to a piece of flotsam in a shoreless sea. The ships that pass throw you bits of food and go their way, but they don't haul you up to safety. That was the fate of several millions in Bengal during the worst famine months.

12

CALCUTTA: THE NON-DESTITUTES, OCTOBER 1943

Calcutta with its surrounding industrial area has a population of a little over four million to-day. These people between themselves do not raise four tons of foodgrains in the year. They are employed in industrial effort and in carrying on the life of a great city. On a bare subsistence level, they would need to consume about four million pounds of foodgrains a day. And this was roughly the quantity India's War Transport Member Sir Edward Benthall said he could carry daily into Calcutta. More than this average it would be difficult to maintain throughout the year, if our over-burdened railways should also serve adequately the needs of the Army in the Eastern Command. It is only in the recent months that the railways leading into Calcutta have been carrying over 2,500 tons of food a day, but in the first half of the year they did not carry enough to feed even Calcutta alone. Wherefrom then did Calcutta get her food supply? She got it from within Bengal. Not only did she get what she needed, but she also got much more as she had the means and the power to hoard against the needs of an uncertain day.

The 1943 famine did not affect the native population of Calcutta to the point of destitution,

starvation and death. If it did, there would have been a revolution. There would have been a disastrous fall in the output of the war plants. While the famine that swept Bengal was not severe on Calcutta to the point of killing any of her citizens, nevertheless the city's population was hit hard in many other ways. Food prices were high, very high, and not sufficient food was available even at those fantastic prices. As common a sight as the starved, destitute immigrants from the rural areas, was the sight of long queues of women and children before the controlled shops that sold rice, sugar, *atta* and kerosene. Every day the shops kept open for a few hours until their limited stocks were exhausted. It was a tiresome job waiting there for hours in the sun to get just a day's supply of rice or sugar. Women and children predominated in the queues. Their men-folk had a job of work to do to earn their livelihood and could not afford to waste their time. To get a place near the fore-end of the queues, most of the women gathered near the shops at night, slept on the pavements, woke up before daylight and took their places either standing or squatting. Those at the tail-end didn't have an earthly chance of getting their *seer* of rice which was all a shop would sell a person at a time. Each shop got 320 *seers* of rice a day, and after the shopkeeper had served 320 people he closed up for the day. I am not sure that all this quantity was sold. Some of it must have found its way into the black market. There must have been underweighing, too.

The black market in Calcutta is a curious place of business. It is either empty or poorly

stocked. If you asked for a maund of rice, the shopkeeper would helplessly spread out his hands symbolic of his inability to help you. He knew your mind and you also knew his. Then you persisted and said prices did not matter at all and that anyhow you wanted your maund of rice. Things became easier after that preliminary cross-talk. You were an old and valued customer and your merest wishes were orders which he would carry out willingly at any cost. You were assured the stuff would reach you. You paid the cash and you got the goods usually at night. Very often you came away with the feeling that the shopkeeper had rendered you an unforgettable obligation. What did it matter if you were squeezed out of forty rupees for a maund of rice, when the controlled price was only twenty rupees? You couldn't meet your wife without the rice without feeling that you were a beaten man. To appear a hero to your wife at the cost of an extra twenty rupees a maund of rice was a cheap enough price to pay. Your neighbours were getting rice somehow. You couldn't afford not to better them.

Though the black-marketeers were many in number, the prosecutions against them were few. They were experts in the subtle art of greasing the palm, and "graft" was an important unwritten item in their unwritten bills of expenses. Where the black-marketeers obtained their stocks from, where they hoarded them and how they disposed of them—these were a mystery. The Calcutta and Howrah Food Drive did not disclose any huge concealed stocks. There were restrictions on movements of foodstuffs into and out of Calcutta.

Bearing these facts together in mind, it was amazing how there could be black markets in Calcutta. Either the Food Drive was conducted in a haphazard and inefficient fashion, or a good deal of the grain brought into Calcutta on Government account must have found its way into the black market. Of course, Government might have been building up stocks with a view to introducing rationing. Anyway, the grain that arrived in October and the previous months didn't seem to reach either the people of Calcutta or those of the districts through controlled channels.

A considerable percentage of Calcutta's population went unserved either by the controlled shops or by any scheme instituted by various employers to issue cheap food grains to their employees. Not being directly engaged in any war effort or undertaking of vital importance, they were left to fend for themselves. How then did they get their food? The black market was their only resource. If it didn't exist, many of them would have starved and swelled the number of the destitutes. The black market was a logical consequence of the absence of rationing, when commodities were in short supply and there was uncontrolled free trade.

You cannot abolish the black market by appeals to the conscience of the food-racketeer. Your appeal will never reach the right address. If appeals can save a situation, then capitalists will have turned socialists long ago. The black-marketeers at times were a generous lot. Like their brethren elsewhere, I believe some of them

were running free kitchens in Calcutta or helping in one way or another to run them.

The Calcutta black-marketeer was a powerful person. He had enormous monetary resources behind him. He could buy huge stocks, hold them back and conceal them. He had the means of bringing grain into Calcutta. His contemporary in the districts was not half so powerful. He also hoarded, but in a small way. The cultivator-hoarder was not in any sense a black-marketeer. And, I don't believe there were many of this last kind in Bengal during 1943. Some of the bigger cultivators kept back their grain for some time from the market, but the bigger cultivators who could afford to do so were far too few. Most of the smaller cultivators disposed of their stocks within three or four months of the last harvest (1942-43). The very fact that rice was not available at even controlled rates (which were nearly four times above the normal) in the richest rice-growing district of Bengal, Barisal, during the months of September and October should afford enough proof for the contention that there just was not enough rice in that district to feed everybody. While black markets existed in Calcutta in October, there were none then in the rural areas of Bengal. The naked truth was there wasn't enough in those months to feed everybody in Bengal, even under a perfect system of distribution.

In Calcutta, it was not rice alone that was difficult to get at high prices. Every necessary article of consumption was high-priced. Sugar, *atta*, mustard oil, potatoes, fruits, dairy products

and eggs—every thing almost that man needs to sustain life on was beyond the income of most people. High prices forced down consumption and almost everybody but the very well-to-do went short. The poor wage-earners, the low-salaried employees, the vast middle classes, lower and upper, all of them were hard hit. They were on the verge of economic ruin. Many of them had to pawn and pledge their small wealth in silver and gold jewellery. A large number raised money on their insurance policies, took loans from their provident funds and in all manner of ways mortgaged their future in a desperate attempt to live in the present. With their meagre reserves wiped out. the middle classes were ceasing to be in the middle. They were fast becoming one with the propertyless working class. The famine was relentlessly pulling down the established economic structure in Bengal. It is difficult to visualise now what the shape of economic life in Bengal as well as India is going to be in the next two decades. The famine has shaken not only Bengal's economic structure, but as it sends its tremors in widening circles it is also bound to affect the economy of the whole of the country.

Under the conditions of a war-time economy, with the added complication of food being in a state of short supply, the rich in Calcutta were getting richer. They helped carry on the war at a handsome profit. They were among the people who cornered food and helped precipitate the famine. There was a lot of easy money going round and trading in food was a most profitable business. They knew the tricks. They were the

ones who could buy at any price anything from a pin up to a prostitute, create an artificial scarcity, let the market soar and then sell out or lease out in a rising market. It wasn't speculation in the understood sense of the word. It was very clever business. These businessmen knew what kind of a Government they were having, how muddle-headed and weak-kneed it was; they knew themselves, how clever and clear-headed they were. They were very strong, too. And being lords of the jungle, in this game of survival, the big beasts ate up the little ones. But it would be poor sportsmanship to grouse against them. Everything was fair in this game of life.

The question of colour had no place in this hoarding business, as sometimes made out. There were black hoarders and white hoarders, and hoarders of intermediate and indeterminate hues. If one man hoarded for sheer profiteering, someone else hoarded on the plea of feeding labour employed by him. It was hoarding all the same whatever excuse anybody might choose to offer.

The contrasts in Calcutta during the famine days were most disgusting. Calcutta like any other big, modern city has always been a city of contrasts. The palatial bungalows in Alipore compared with the squalid *bustees* in Howrah and North Calcutta, wherein people lived piled on top of one another in lightless rooms, ached your mind if ever you thought about these things. There were men and women who were perpetually underfed and others who were ill with overfeeding. Somehow, the contrasts in the days before the famine didn't hurt the eye so much, because no-

body died of actual, physical hunger. But in the months of September, October and November the contrasts weighed heavily on one's mind. In those dark days with people dying on the pavements for want of food, one could have had a sumptuous twelve-course meal in any of the great Calcutta hotels for under five rupees. Anyone who had the money could have filled himself till his belly ached. The rich were quite well served indeed. So long as there was no rationing, they would continue to be excellently served. Food Minister Suhrawardy in fact said that no man who had money need starve in Calcutta, for he could always get what he wanted in hotels. He spoke the truth. While several eating houses that served the poorer sections of the community had to close down for want of foodstuffs, the richer hotels flourished and were more crowded than ever. There was quite a number of new ones, too. If you knew your Calcutta two years ago, you would be surprised now if you walked along Chowringhee to see dozens of small, smart eating houses with florid, fanciful names. Men in khaki and men in civies with women to keep them company crowded these places whether there was a famine on or not. Luckily for them, the famine had been confined to the poor, landless working classes. Just as it was a great achievement of the India Government to have prevented the spread of the famine to areas outside Bengal, so was it a great achievement of whoever the powers were to have stopped the hunger-malady from mounting to the higher rungs of the social ladder.

I said the contrasts in Calcutta hurt the eye. They did when you saw on Saturday nights black-coated, stiff-shirted, sweating men pushing around bare-backed women on crowded dance floors and when you with a flash-back of the mind remembered the hapless wretches lying scattered on the open streets.

Food is a thing which everybody must have, be he rich or be he poor. No civilized society can afford to starve its poorer sections. No intelligent society can afford to let its working units go hungry, get emaciated and finally perish. It will not pay in the long run. The only way in which we can secure equality in the fundamental necessity of life—food—is by rationing when food is admittedly in a state of short supply. There was and there is bound to be an overall food shortage in the whole of the country for as long as the war lasts, but the shortage certainly was not of such proportions that it should have led to an acute famine in which millions had to die. Rationing would have saved the situation. Everybody would have had less to eat than before, but everyone would have had just enough to carry on.

Calcutta must be rationed quickly. There has been talk of rationing Calcutta since July of 1943. But as yet there is no evidence of Government's intention to introduce effective rationing in the course of the year. Bombay rationed itself in May 1943, and Madras followed four months later. Calcutta is still tinkering at the idea. Calcutta must stay rationed for years, till the war

is over and the goods of the world once again begin to flow freely.

Calcutta must be fed by imports from outside the province of Bengal. A cordon must be drawn round the city and no food from the rural areas must be allowed to flow into Calcutta. Calcutta, with her cosmopolitan population, with her great industries contributing to the general war effort of the country and serving the needs of different industries in other parts of India, must be regarded as a charge on the whole of India. Bengal, a normally deficit province, should not, especially in wartime, be made responsible for feeding her capital city. If Bengal's jute should serve the needs of India and the world, then India and the world should come to Bengal's rescue in the matter of food. For Bengal herself, it would not be a bad proposition if she should grow no more jute than she needed and raised instead paddy and other foodcrops on land released from jute cultivation. If her Government threatened to do so, then London and New Delhi might see more sense.

Postscript. Since writing this chapter in October-November 1943, a few things have happened which I should like to record before the chapter goes off to the printer. The Central Government have undertaken to feed Calcutta for a year (1944) with imported foodstuffs from outside the province and they have sent a directive to the Bengal Government to introduce rationing within the end of January 1944. The price of rice in the black market which stood at over Rs. 40 a maund in October has fallen to around Rs. 20

towards the end of December. It is wavering now and there are indications of its going up again. Even as I write to-day, Christmas Day, hunger-victims are continuing to die in the city's destitutes' hospitals. The health of the city has been so badly affected by the famine that the weekly deathrate is over 200 per cent of the normal.

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SARISHA : OCTOBER 1943

You will not find this little spot on any map of Bengal you are likely to possess. It is a small village in the 24 Parganas district where great work was and is being done. It deserves to be put on the map in big, bold letters. Like a good deed shining in a wicked world, Sarisha has stood out as a centre of succour radiating hope to a hundred villages around. Sarisha is on the Diamond Harbour Road, twenty-six miles from Calcutta. The Ramakrishna Mission has had an *ashram* there since 1921, and in October when I was at Sarisha the *ashram* had turned itself out into a big, well-organised relief centre.

I spent an entire day at Sarisha and its neighbourhood. I watched the Ramakrishna Mission doing relief work, and it was an education in how social service must be rendered. The relief work in Sarisha was a contrast to Calcutta.

24 Parganas is a one-crop district. Harvest time is between November and January. Normally, the district raises a good crop and is self-sufficient regarding rice. Its last (1942-43) *aman* crop, however, was not good. Insect pests destroyed a great part of it. In 1943, 24 Parganas became a deficit district. During the first half of 1943, the district was able to carry on with what it

got out of its last *aman* crop. After June, the province-wide Food Drive inaugurated by the Nazimuddin Ministry put fear into the hearts of the cultivators and made them sell whatever little stocks they possessed. Several cultivators, whose granaries I inspected and found empty, told me that they had sold away their stocks for fear of confiscation. The stocks they sold, much of that quantity, must have gone into the black market.

Another reason why 24 Parganas was hard hit by the famine was its proximity to Calcutta which drained substantial quantities of the district's rice stocks. By June the district showed signs of distress, and large numbers of its population began their trek to Calcutta. Most of them were landless labourers and artisans. A random survey of the destitutes in Calcutta conducted by the Calcutta University showed that 24 Parganas, Hooghly and Midnapore were the districts from which the vast majority of the destitutes hailed. 47 per cent of them were landless agricultural workers, 25 per cent were small land-owning farmers and only 6 per cent were professional beggars. It was also discovered that about 24 per cent of the destitutes had broken away from their families.

It is against this background that the work of the Ramakrishna Mission in Sarisha must be studied. When I was at Sarisha, the Mission's relief covered an area of about 75 square miles serving the needs of over a hundred villages. 60,000 people lived in those villages, and of that number 20,000 were in receipt of some form of relief or other. 12,000 more needed relief, but

the Mission had not the funds or the material to help them.

Relief work was begun at Sarisha about June when conditions began to deteriorate visibly. The Mission was well-equipped to undertake the work. They had been established in the neighbourhood for over two decades. They knew the people around them, their conditions and their needs. They had established schools in the village in which over 400 students, boys and girls, were studying. The students, the staff and buildings were a great help. It was amazing to see how efficiently the Mission had utilised their resources to carry on famine relief work. Sarisha provided an example to Bengal how educational institutions could be harnessed to conduct relief in an emergency. Properly directed, Bengal's many thousands of schools, their staff and their students could be organised for conducting pre-rationing surveys, distributing relief and working out rationing schemes to suit the particular needs of each distressed area.

At Sarisha the Ramakrishna Mission had co-ordinated different types of relief work. They ran free kitchens, issued dry grain doles, sold foodgrains at controlled rates, distributed milk and cloth and in general inspired in the hearts of the peasants courage and hope to go through those dark days. Five free kitchens were functioning under their supervision, and from them nearly 6,000 people were being fed every day. The Mission ran three milk centres for children and nursing mothers. 500 children received milk or a porridge of rice and milk. From another centre,

rice was issued to selected poor families in the area free of cost. 100 maunds a week was the quantity they were issuing then, and the grain was issued once a week. The families on dole were previously selected by the Mission's workers and they were all card-indexed perfectly. From two other centres, 300 maunds of rice a week were sold at controlled prices, again to selected families. *Atta* and *dal* were also distributed from these centres. To the extent permitted by their resources, the Mission was running a kind of un-official rationing scheme.

The success of the Mission's work was due, to a good extent, to the enthusiasm and idealism and energy of their workers, among whom should be numbered nearly a hundred of their students, boys and girls. They helped survey the affected villages, gather data and issue tickets to the needy. They issued free meal tickets, free dry grain dole tickets, milk tickets, cheap grain tickets and cloth tickets. They instructed the people where to go and when to go and how to use their tickets. The Mission then got from the Bengal Relief Committee, the Marwari Relief Committee and the Government free and subsidised supplies of grain and cloth and began their work of relief. Since many of the volunteers administering relief were local people and in many cases related to those on relief, they were trusted by the people. It was a common sight to see a school-boy or a school-girl ladle out *kichuri* or issue milk or rice to his or her own relatives. The people on relief, therefore, did not lose their sense of self-respect. They felt it was a job in which

mutual co-operation was required and a job that had to be done and put up with in those very hard times. They had no abject looks in their eyes as destitutes in some other places had. They knew they were in trouble, though they did not know how or why it came upon them. The Mission was doing relief work, and they helped by seeing to it that no one cadged for something he was not entitled to at the expense of someone else who probably stood in greater need.

The Ramakrishna Mission's work at Sarisha had literally saved the neighbouring rural area from utter ruination. Their greatest achievement, perhaps, was the successful way in which they had preserved the family life of the famine-affected people. The landless agriculturists, who had absolutely no means of livelihood, had at least their huts to live in. They had small kitchen-gardens in which to raise a few vegetables. They could catch a little fish and cook their meal with the free dry grain doles they received. Husband, wife and children kept together. They looked forward to harvest time with hope. They did not have to wander on to Calcutta's pavements and perish there. I could see for myself that the health of those on relief at Sarisha was far better than those on relief at Calcutta. The Mission's relief work gave them a lease of life till the *aman* crop should be gathered in. An old woman who was standing in the *kichuri* line told me that, but for the meal she was getting there, she would have died long before.

I noticed that the village poor had a sturdy sense of self-respect. Anybody who had some-

thing to go on with didn't go on relief. It was only those who were absolutely without any means of getting food that went to the relief kitchens. A natural shyness prevented them from seeking relief until sheer necessity drove them to it. If rice was made available to them at prices which they could pay, they woulld cease to queue up to the free kitchens. If this couldn't be done quickly, then there was the danger of their learning to depend on free kitchens as a matter of course and of losing any inclination to work.

While the *kichuri* served out at Sarisha was quite good, it certainly was not enough to sustain a peasant. Very often one person's share was consumed by two or three. The persons on relief, instead of starving quickly, were starving out gradually, all the while edging towards the limit of their endurance. Their physical reserves exhausted, they would be easy victims to any epidemic that might break out. The rural destitutes did not like the taste of standard gruel whenever they got it. *Kichuri* was better. Whenever for long periods they were fed on gruel, they grumbled and pathetically said they had almost forgotten the taste of rice.

One or two things struck me as I watched the relief activities at Sarisha, and about them I must say a few words. In the rural areas, where caste restrictions are rigid and strong, the famine was working a silent revolution. I could see in the long queues a Caste Hindu lined up behind a Namasudra and himself followed by a Moslem. I saw Hindu mothers and Moslem mothers feeding their children under one roof. As Sahu, a Vaishya

cultivator, whom I met in the house of Das, a Namasudra peasant, told me, "When there is hunger, who cares for caste ?" Another point: the men and women who were on relief were anxious for one thing more than relief. They all wanted work. They liked to toil for their food. After the fields were ploughed, the seedlings raised and transplanted, until harvest time, there was not much to do in a village, and the landless day-labourer had a hard time. He worked a bit on his own homestead, raising some vegetables in the kitchen-garden and repairing his cottage, but these didn't bring him any money or grain. The peasant's leisure has got to be properly organised for profitable work and recreation, if his standard of living is to be raised. These are long-range problems, but they have to be tackled right now if the rural folk are to be rehabilitated on the soil to which they belong.

Before saying *au revoir* (I meant to visit the place again) to Sarisha, I went to see Ashapur—the village of hope as she is named. A rickety taxi took me and Santhanam (he was covering the famine for *The Hindustan Times*) to the vicinity of the village. There was no vehicular road to the village from the mud-track over which we had driven. We walked along a ridge to reach Ashapur, which lay nestling in a vast expanse of lush, green paddy fields. Some forty to fifty families were living in that village. About ten families held land under lease from zamindars, and they cultivated it themselves and with the help of day-labourers in the village. The rest of the village folk were labourers, fishermen and

artisans of different types. Many families in Ashapur were hard hit by the famine. The landed cultivators were not on relief; most of the rest were. Khuki, Khanu, Balika, Nur Mahomed and Sukra, the children whom I saw at Sarisha receiving their milk, came from this village. Their parents had another month to go for the harvest. The *aman* was in excellent condition and, if all went well, they would have plenty to go on with in the coming year. The landless labourers would have work, wages and food, and, if rice was not sent out of the district, 24 Parganas would have enough rice during 1944,

I asked a day-labourer in Ashapur whether he got his wages in cash or kind. He said the normal practice was to get about five annas a day during harvest time with two meals. He would have work like that for two months. This time they would like to get their wages in grain. I asked a landed cultivator whether he proposed paying in grain this year. He said if everybody decided to pay in grain, he also would pay in grain. Five annas a day for two months wouldn't go far into the coming year if the price of rice did not come down much, very much below Rs. 20 or Rs. 25 a maund, which were then the ruling prices. The landless labourers in Ashapur were indebted to the landed cultivators and they were afraid to unite and demand payment in kind. The landed clultivators were apprehensive of what was going to happen to their *aman* as they were not sure of the Government's policy. Everybody was in a state of confusion. They did not know what price was going to be fixed for rice. They did

not know whether their stocks were going to be seized. They did not know whether they would be able to buy at fairly normal prices the goods they needed like cloth, kerosene, agricultural implements and the like. They were afraid of the dark future. Their confidence in the ability of the Government to look after their welfare was badly shaken. I felt it was not going to be an easy job to prevent a famine in 1944 unless Government were able to win back their confidence.

Postscript : In the third week of December 1943 I again went into the district of 24 Parganas, this time to see the famine relief work of the Army. I passed by Sarisha though I didn't stop there. I drove direct to Diamond Harbour town together with a number of newspaper men. We were supposed to be following the Viceroy, but quite early in the chase we missed him and landed instead at a spot where a famous regiment of the Indian Army was doing an excellent bit of relief work. I must tell you something of the Army's work, as their work has been uniformly good and efficient in whatever type of relief job they have been engaged. Besides helping to transport food stocks to villages far in the interior to maintain free kitchens there, they were doing medical relief work on a vast scale. The whole sub-division was mapped, and scouts were sent out to report on conditions in every village. No sooner a black spot was discovered than a mobile dispensary with medicines and a doctor would be despatched to it to take preventive and curative measures. The people were inoculated, quinine was issued and

advice was given. The spot was checked up again some time later. Villages in the water-logged Sundarbans area were also visited regularly and carrier-pigeons were employed to take back messages for urgent medical aid. The scouting launch would go farther on its next job with the assurance that another launch would soon be on its way with doctors and medicines to help the affected area. Inoculation was combined with cloth distribution, and anybody who was marked out to receive a *dhothi* or a *saree* would have to submit to a mild injection. I saw nervous women facing the Army doctors with anxious looks, but they all smiled after the painless ordeal was over and some were quite willing to be inoculated over again, if they would get another *saree*. The incidence from cholera had greatly decreased in areas where the Army had been at work for some time. The Army was doing its best to help and, given time, would doubtless control disease to a great extent. Another bit of interesting work being done by the Army was the demonstration of how the people could use locally growing grasses and green leaves as food. Some of the men were trained in jungle warfare and they knew the tricks of living off the jungle, and they were showing how the people, too, could at a pinch make a meal out of leaves. The demonstration party moved about and put on their show at various places. That was a good bit of work and it was well done.

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CONTAI : NOVEMBER 1943

The five days I spent in Contai and its neighbourhood would be hard to erase from my memory. Amidst vast expanses of lush, green rice fields I saw grinning skulls lying about and dead bodies beside them, soon to be picked clean of their thin coats of putrid flesh by dogs and jackals prowling round them. The paddy plants, heavy with ears of ripening corn, heaved sighs of hope of a plenteous harvest with every breath of wind that passed over them. And together with those sighs I heard the piteous wail of hunger. The wide open spaces, covered by endless rice fields horizoned by coconut palms and the unknown beyond them, offered no escape to the famine-victims of Contai. They did not know of other places. They belonged to the soil. They stayed on in their ruined villages and, unknown to the world, died by the hundred and the thousand. It was tragic that amidst scenes, that held a promise of so much plenty, there should be so great starvation, sickness and suffering.

Contai is a small coastal sub-division in the West Bengal district of Midnapore. Its soil is rich and, in good times, it used to produce a good deal more rice than the people of the locality needed. It carried on a considerable rice, coconut and salt trade with Calcutta. It was a heavily

populated area with a density of over 800 a square mile. The people were well-to-do and were apt to be rebellious of authority; and in 1932 and in 1942 they gave a lot of trouble to the Government. They were used to the heavy hand of the Government, but, being possessed of considerable powers of recovery, they came out every time unexhausted and prepared to wage a struggle another day. In August and September of 1942 the people of Contai and Midnapore were engaged in a struggle against the Government That struggle cost them dear. Just around that time another most grievous blow in the shape of a cyclone felled them, and from that blow the people of Contai have not yet recovered.

Elsewhere in this book, I have said something of the havoc wrought by the cyclone of October 1942. Thirteen months later, in November 1943, the evidence of the damage it did was still visible to the casual eye. All the way from Contai Road rail station to Contai—a distance of some 35 miles—I found huge tress uprooted, bent and broken, hundreds of village houses with roofs blown off, and skeletons of cattle which had been killed either by the force of the wind or the falling of trees. Evidence of damage increased as I neared Contai town itself. Whole plantations of coconut and betel-nut palms lay levelled to the ground, and much of the countryside lay stripped bare of clumps of trees. Between Contai town and the sea, a belt of land about five miles deep was completely devastated. As I drove from Contai town to Pichaboni, where the road track to Digha-on-the-Sea crosses a canal,

my friendly truck-driver Bankim pointed out to me little wisps of straw hanging from the branches of the few trees that still stood and said the waters had welled up to that height. I guessed it would be twelve feet up from the road level. The tidal wave that followed the storm had breached at several places the sea-dykes that protect Contai from occasional invasions by the sea. It swept everything before it, man and cattle, houses and all they contained, granaries and standing crops and the few big boats that still plied on Contai's canals and rivers. I noticed a couple of big country-boats, that used to carry cargo up to Calcutta, stranded four miles inland from the sea. The tidal wave had carried them to where they were and, since they could not be refloated, they were waiting to be broken up. One village I visited, Samudrapur, was under thirty feet of water and half its population was drowned. According to local estimates, some forty thousand people lost their lives in that flood and storm. The Government's estimates, as I have mentioned earlier, were around fifteen thousand killed.

Another very noticeable feature in the landscape was the absence of cattle and even of birds. I walked for miles on the roof of the sea-dyke off Samudrapur and counted less than a score of cows and bulls as far as I could see. I was told they were recently imported cattle and most of them were purchased with the help of cattle loans. The absence of cattle during the last ploughing season resulted in very great loss to the cultivator and to the State. I asked a number of farmers why their lands were lying fallow, and one of the important

reasons they gave me was that they had no cattle. The loss of cattle also meant a serious loss in the milk supply and several thousands of children were badly affected by this and many hundreds of them must have died of sheer malnutrition.

The saline flood that came in the wake of the cyclone spread over many thousands of acres of good land and ruined their surface soil for a few years to come. Until, in course of time, the rains wash away their salinity, no crop can be raised on such land. I saw for miles and miles saline, fallow land near Mahishagot, Samudrapur, Rasulpur and Majhirchak, all in the Contai area. The loss in human wealth, cattle wealth and crop wealth caused by the cyclone is incalculable, and it will require years of patient and careful effort before the people of the area can be set on their feet.

Before the cyclone and the August-September disturbances, Contai and other areas in Midnapore district, like Tamluk and Mahishadal, suffered from the Government's boat denial and rice removal policies. Thousands of boats, both big and small, that plied on the numerous waterways in the district, were either broken up or removed by Government agents. Neither the Bengal Government nor their servants could have felt happy about this, but the orders came from authorities above them, and they had to obey. The results of this policy were disastrous. When the tidal wave came, many people just got drowned and many, to whom help could have been sent had there been an adequate number of boats, perished for want of timely succour. Several thousands of

fishermen, whose living depended on whether they possessed boats or not, starved for want of their very means of livelihood. In this area, where road communications even in the best of times were none too good and where canal communications were vital to the business of the community, the people were left without their vehicles. While in Contai, I travelled long distances by canal and river; and in the seven-mile stretch between Pichaboni and Samudrapur I came across just three small dinghies that, I was told, had somehow escaped destruction. Before the boat denial policy was carried out, there should have been at least a hundred boats going up and down that canal. Just imagine the fate of the people of a village far in the interior and a long distance away from a big traffic centre. They have neither food nor medicine in that village, and there are men, women and children in it who are both sick and starving. They cannot walk in their poor state of health through miles of slushy paddy fields to receive help, nor can help be sent easily to them. There are no boats available to remove them. What happens is that they starve, get badly ill, and get worse and worse, and then they die unnoticed by civilization. They die so fast that there is not enough fuel to burn the dead, and the corpses are just pitched into the canal to float and rot and be carried away to the sea.

The rice removal policy also affected Midnapore, and allegations were made on the floor of the Bengal Assembly that rice in excess of the quantity laid down by the Government was taken away by their agents. All these factors

acting in combination brought about a state of severe distress in the district by November of 1942. The *aman* crop came in by the end of December, and it helped to tide off the famine for about three or four months. Famine conditions, however, appeared in Midnapore earlier than in other parts of Bengal. By May the price of rice in Contai had risen to Rs. 25 a maund. The cultivating classes had no stocks left. Whatever they had, they had either consumed or sold away.

Deaths due to starvation began to occur in June 1943, and the thin, emaciated hunger-victims also fell an easy prey to malaria and all manner of bowel-complaints. A private survey of Union 10 in Contai Thana revealed that the number of cyclone deaths in that area was 1,100 (October 1942); between November 1942 and June 1943, it was 400; and between June 1943 and August 1943, it was about 700. The surveyor further reported, "Former cultivators of the locality are wandering as beggars in the last stages of emaciation; the dead are being thrown into canals, and the journey by boat from Contai to Panipia is as revolting to-day as in the wake of last year's cyclone." The surveyor wrote his report in September. I travelled by the Panipia canal in November; the stench was still there, and there were a couple of corpses, too.

To the people of Contai, the famine was even more disastrous than the cyclone and the tidal wave. Another private statistical survey proved this point. 500 odd beggars in Contai were interviewed in Contai town during the last two days of September 1943. 2 per cent of them were men,

53 per cent were women and the rest were children. Only 4 per cent of them were professional beggars; the rest were rendered destitute during the preceding twelve months. The question was put to them as to when they left their homes. Their answers showed that 81 per cent of them left their homes between May 1943 and the end of August 1943, which corresponded to the period of the famine. As a result of the cyclone's havoc only 19 per cent were rendered homeless. Here are their answers in greater detail: 23 per cent left home after the cyclone; 9 per cent after May 1943; 11 per cent after June 1943; 23 per cent after July 1943; and 38 per cent after August 1943.

Next, they were asked as to why they left their homes. 36 per cent of them replied that they had been either deserted by their husbands or abandoned by their parents. 33 per cent said that their husbands or parents were killed by hunger or malaria. Only 29 per cent said that they had lost their husbands or parents in the cyclone. 2 per cent gave no intelligible answer.

During the time I was in Contai, I covered nearly 200 miles travelling by foot, boat and lorry. I went into villages far away from the trodden tracks in which ailing men and women were dragging on a wretched existence until death should release them from pain. The unvarying sight of starvation and disease was finally too much for me and I had to cut short my stay to escape to Calcutta. Thank the powers, there was no famine there. I came away with the impression that, in spite of the large-scale relief that had been

carried on in Contai during the last few months, Contai was and is bound to remain for years to come a festering sore on the face of Bengal.

Even before I reached Contai town I could see signs of great distress in roadside villages. It was market-day in the village of Kalighai the evening I passed through it. The driver stopped the bus and got down to attend to an imaginary defect somewhere in the engine, but I guess he wanted to drink a cup of tea and chat with some of his old cronies who had gathered round him. I walked along the winding bazaar, both so that I might stretch my legs a bit and that I might see what was going on. Small quantities of rice were on sale. The price asked was Rs. 26 a maund, and no one had more than half a maund to offer. Similar quantities of *dal* and a few other types of gram were also available. In one corner brisk business was going on in household utensils and silver jewellery. Brass vessels fetched Rs. 1-3-0 a *seer*, and silverware Rs. 0-11-0 a rupee-weight. Compared with prices brass and silver fetched in Calcutta, the peasants of Kalighai were selling away their metallic assets at ridiculously low rates. They were not, however, normal transactions in which seller and buyer could haggle as much as they pleased and finally arrive at the lowest common measure of loss and profit.

The physical condition of the people who were wandering about in the bazaar was wretched, and there was among them quite a big proportion of destitutes clad in dirty rags. They moved about on their haunches, foot by foot, picking up scattered grains of rice or gram. They were so

hungry that they ate up on the spot the grains they picked, together with their coatings of dust and dirt. All the familiar signs of starvation were there: swollen faces, bellies and ankles; dry, withered skins and bones sticking out of them.

Inside Contai town distress was not so evident. The Viceroy had visited the place a week before I did, and the town had been cleared of beggars and wandering destitutes. A free kitchen in the town which was attracting a considerable crowd had closed down on official orders, and, in consequence, the town was free of destitutes. Closing down that kitchen was not altogether a bad thing. There were a number of free kitchens in the surrounding countryside to which the starving could go instead of having to wander for miles to Contai town. From Contai I followed the trail of the Viceroy and went to Mahishagot, a wayside station four miles away on the road to Pichaboni and Ramnagar. To the left of the road, huge areas of land lay fallow. They could not be cultivated as they were still saline. To the right a fine rice crop was growing on big stretches of paddy land. At Mahishagot the Friends' Ambulance Unit were running a milk distribution centre and a free kitchen. A home for destitutes was rapidly building, and, as soon as it could be set up, their idea was to close down the free kitchen. My old friend Sudhir Ghosh, who gave up a career in Clive Street to work with the F. A. U. in the Contai area, showed me round and said their milk distribution benefited some 4,000 children and nursing mothers; and that very soon they proposed extending their scheme

to benefit a further 4,000 children. The F. A. U. had divided the Contai area into seventeen sections, and every day one of their members visited two centres, carrying to them stocks of milk, inspecting the distribution arrangements and helping in the distribution. A pound of dry, powdered milk or liquid evaporated milk was the ration allotted to a child for a week. Children who badly needed the milk were selected beforehand and were issued tickets. On a day notified to them their mothers or friends came to the centre, showed their tickets and after the proper entries were made on them received their milk tins and went away. Once every two months, the F. A. U. held a kind of baby-show at the centre and every child receiving milk had to be brought for inspection. Their old tickets were destroyed and fresh tickets were issued to them. This helped the F. A. U. to watch the progress of the children and enabled them to check on the fact that the tickets were being used to feed children that really existed. In a poverty-stricken community, it was not uncommon for a mother to come for her weekly quota of milk for her child that had perhaps died some time ago and to sell her milk tin to a nearby tea-shop owner or swop it for a *seer* of rice.

Milk distribution in the Contai area started in February 1943, and it was going on when I visited the area in November. I was told it was likely to be continued for some more months. The beneficial results of this long continued help were apparent to the eye. Children who had been regularly receiving milk looked in better trim, and, provided their parents could soon be set on their

feet, they had a good chance of growing up into healthy men and women. I asked a number of parents as to what they thought of the milk distribution and they said their children would have died in its absence. There were scarcely any milch cows in the area and nursing mothers were so emaciated that they had little milk to give to their children. There was such a scarcity of milk in Contai town that on several occasions we had tea without a drop of milk.

From Mahishagot it is a three mile run to Pichaboni which is a traffic centre of some importance. Besides a Government relief store, Pichaboni had two free kitchens, one on either side of the canal, a little hospital run by the Hindu Mahasabha and a bigger Government emergency hospital in the process of building. The free kitchens here and at Mahishagot were under the management of the F. A. U., and the ladleful of *kichuri* they gave away around noon consisted of rice and *dal* cooked with vegetables and oil. I found the *kichuri* quite nice to taste, but the quantity they gave could have been greater. There were too many hungry guests to be fed from a limited supply and they were all insatiably hungry. There were supposed to be a little over 700 free kitchens in the Contai area either run by the Government or subsidised by them. A number of them existed just on paper. They were located in far away places and it was difficult to check whether they functioned regularly or with what efficiency they functioned. I happened to pass by a free kitchen in the village of Mukundapur, some seven miles from Contai town, and noticed that the

kichuri given out there was badly cooked. The quantity dished out was a quarter of a *seer*. The measuring ladle had no depth. It was flat as a table-top. I wondered if even a quarter of a *seer* of the pasty liquid they made there did finally get into the bowl of the starving destitute.

There was a lot of scope for corruption in the running of free kitchens, especially when they were managed by semi-Government agencies. The food was usually badly cooked, the quantity served was meagre, and the hungry had to walk for miles to get a mouthful of it. That was no relief at all. The Government's inability to issue dry grain doles was really an admission of the poor stocks they possessed. Free kitchens were necessary in a place like Calcutta, where the destitutes had no homes. But in rural areas they were out of place and quite demoralising. To a peasant living in his village home, a dry grain dole was better than a watery meal once a day. A dry grain dole system also offered less chances for corruption. The dry dole system was functioning in a few areas in Contai, but it needed to be greatly expanded.

I saw the dry grain dole system at work in Majhirchak. The scheme was being run by a few monks of the Ramakrishna Mission, and it was run to near perfection. The route to Majhirchak from Contai was not an easy one. Some bits of the road were among the worst in my experience and my lorry took some very heavy punishment. The lorry stopped near the Rasulpur river and after crossing over by boat I had to walk a mile on a ridge to reach the Ramakrishna

Mission's temporary *ashram* in Majhirchak. The Mission got their rice from the Government. I was told it came by boat from Calcutta. Before they began distributing doles in November 1942, the monks of the Mission took a census of the neighbourhood and issued tickets to those who needed relief. From then on, every week the ticket-holders got their doles regularly. I asked the monks what the quantity of the dole was, and they told me it was two *seers* of rice an adult a week, and it was half of that for a child. It worked out to eight ounces of rice a person a day. It was a palpably inadequate quantity. But it was better than what they would have got out of a free kitchen. No free kitchen served eight ounces of cooked grain in one meal. Besides, the dole-recipients did not have to walk and wait every day at a free kitchen centre. They did not have to repeat every day the demoralising act of sitting down for hours and in long rows to receive their meal, and of wailing and fighting for more at the end of it.

The Ramakrishna Mission in Contai were working from three centres; Majhirchak, Khejiri and Haludbari. Every week they distributed on behalf of the Government rice doles to 40,000 persons, and issued milk on behalf of the F. A. U. to 1,200 children.

According to official statements nearly half the population of Contai sub-division were in receipt of one type of relief or another. That would be roughly 30,000 people. It did not mean that the rest of the people did not need assistance. The coastal sub-divisions of Midnapore district

were all so badly affected both by the cyclone and the famine that it would take years for the rehabilitation of the people of those areas. The scale of relief being given was not adequate; it was not efficiently administered, and the different forms of relief activities were not well co-ordinated. Hungry people required not only to be fed, but they had also to be medically cared for, clothed and housed, if they were to survive as reasonably healthy men and women. A relief worker with ten months of experience in the area said, "What has been witnessed in the past six months is the general deterioration of the inhabitants of the district. Under the most favourable circumstances, the official relief allowance is a bare subsistence measure. Under these conditions disease has flourished. Epidemics of cholera, dysentery and malaria have, in turn, taken a heavy toll of life."

That malaria and dysentery, cholera and other diseases induced by starvation and vitamin deficiencies were taking a very heavy toll of life, in fact a heavier toll of life than did the cyclone, was a fact. In a sea-side village I visited, the cyclone had killed 130 people and malaria and dysentery, during the past six months alone, had killed over a hundred. And quite a number of people I saw in the village seemed to me to be destined to die. Some were beyond all hopes of recovery; and some, who could have survived had medical attention been available to them, had no chance of getting it. I journeyed to this village by canal—that was the only available route—and within a length of about seven miles I counted on its banks not less than 500 skulls and skeletons, most of them still

bound to their bamboo biers. They were not the remains of the victims of the cyclone. A number of skeletons had still bits of rotting flesh on them in spite of the attempts of dogs and jackals to pick them clean. Too many people had died in too quick succession in the nearby villages for their relatives to be able to cremate the dead. There was not enough fuel to burn the corpses. And few among those left alive had the energy either to perform fully the rites due to the departed. Every grinning skull and every stark skeleton was a tragic evidence of either death by hunger or by disease. The entire place looked like an abandoned battle-field.

Medical relief in Contai, as late as in November when I visited it, was in a mess. For months past relief organisations had been crying hoarse for emergency hospitals to isolate the infectious and treat the sick. Food without medicine was utterly useless. They demanded hospitals, doctors and nurses, and medicine. They asked for tube-wells and malaria control measures. They got very little of what they needed, because hospitals were under the control of the Surgeon-General to the Bengal Government, quinine and sera and prophylactic drugs in general were handled by the Director of Public Health, and tube-wells were possibly the responsibility of some other person in Writers' Buildings, and between these different authorities there was not much co-ordination. A scheme for building nine emergency hospitals in the Contai area was sanctioned some months before November 1943. But by November only one good hospital was functioning

and that was in Contai town. For one whole year after the cyclone, the Civil Surgeon of Midnapore had not, I was reliably informed, visited Contai. The additional Civil Surgeon did better; he visited Contai four times, I was informed, to attend four committee meetings.

The emergency hospital in Contai was visited by the Viceroy, and had he asked to see another such hospital there would have been none other to show him. I was told that two other emergency hospitals functioned at Pichaboni and Bhoga. I went to both the places. I will tell you what I found. At Pichaboni I saw a Government hospital in the course of building. It would be another month before it could function. Just across, on the other side of the road, was a small hospital run by the Hindu Mahasabha. Fifteen of its forty beds were empty. Don't deduce from this that the locality was so healthy that it couldn't provide the patients to fill up those empty beds. Given a couple of trucks and four stretcher-bearers, I could have filled a score of hospitals with patients badly in need of hospital treatment. The curious story behind the empty beds was, I learnt, that the hospital wanted to keep down its mortality rate, and patients beyond hopes recovery were turned away. Every room in the hospital had a picture of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee. I do not know what therapeutic effect that had on the patients. The physician-in-charge couldn't enlighten me on this point. I was certain Dr. Mookerjee was not aware of these experiments in pictorial therapy. Anyway, it would have been much better to have filled up the

hospital even with dying patients, for that, I was certain, would have reflected truly the wish of this great and good son of Bengal.

I went to the other place, Bhoga. A thirteen-mile lorry-ride on a bad road brought me to the Rasulpur river. After crossing over I legged it for a mile to reach Bhoga. The hospital that I was told existed there was also in the course of building. There was, however, a small mud-walled, thatched cottage which did duty for a hospital. There were two and a half patients in it lying sprawled on the ground, an old man and a woman and a child. They were ill with malaria. There was an old sub-assistant surgeon in charge, with two compounders and two attendants. He was on the retired list and had been recalled to duty. When I went to see him, he was down with fever and he told me he was also diabetic. He said he was not going to stick it out in that place for long and that he had indeed sent in his resignation and was waiting to be relieved. The next day in Contai I heard from an official that the Bhoga doctor had written to say he would commit suicide if he were kept any longer in that village! The hospital had a good quantity of drugs, though, curiously enough, it had a syringe without a needle and absolutely no sterilising arrangements whatsoever, not even absolute alcohol. On the top of all these, there was not a drop of drinking water within two miles of the place. The nearest tube-well was across the Rasulpur river, and every time one wanted a pot of drinking water one had to send somebody to trek that distance forward and back and depend

on the mercy of the boatman to ferry him across. The ponds nearby were either saline or their water was polluted. I was told by one of the hospital attendants that he drank it one day and went down the next with dysentery. That was Bhoga hospital.

The emergency hospital in Contai was doing splendid work. It was overcrowded and occasionally it ran short of medicines. But it had a couple of fine doctors running it. A non-official woman doctor, Shanti Soni from Delhi, was rendering voluntary service, and with her tireless patience, enthusiasm and skill, she infused a fine spirit of service in that institution. It was all to the good of the patients; but non-official help occasionally became uncomfortable to authority as, I understood, it did in Contai. In the presence of a higher authority non-officials sometimes did not say that which local authority would want them to say. The Viceroy, when he was in Contai, heard, I was told, that drugs had to be purchased through non-official sources as otherwise they took a long time in the coming. While I was in Contai the Director General of the Indian Medical Service had come down to find out for himself the shape of things.

The first chill of winter had set in Contai while I was there in early November. The destitutes, who had no homes and even those that had, badly needed clothes to protect themselves from the weather. I saw quite a number of destitutes utterly naked, and even those that had some rags on were not far from nudity. A cloth famine could be as disastrous to human health as a food

famine. I felt sure that many among those hit hard by the famine would be worse hit by the winter. Many of the famine-victims were in no position to buy clothes then or even later.

In Contai the people worst hit by the famine were fishermen, landless agriculturists, and small-scale subsistence farmers. These classes bore first the shocks of the famine. An enormous number of subsistence farmers, who possessed between one and four *bighas* of land, were reduced to such straits, that in November they were selling a *bigha* ordinarily worth about 300 rupees for 60 to 70 rupees. Land with the crop on it fetched about double the distress prices. I found the busiest place in Contai to be the Land Registrar's Office where transactions were being conducted till late in the night. The seller was in such dire need of cash that he very often paid a *baksheesh* to get his transactions settled quickly. The buyers were a shrewd lot. They put down on the sale deed a price that bore no proportion to the actual sum they paid to the seller. They were ensuring themselves against the possibility of the Government restoring land to the peasants who had to part with it during the famine.

It was only perhaps during a famine that such an economic phenomenon, as that of a whole class of people being rapidly dispossessed of all their productive property and even reduced to beggary, could occur. The Bengal famine was fast pushing a fairly large class of "small-haves" into the class of the "have-nots", besides killing immense numbers of the "have-nots". The decreasing numbers of "haves" were, however,

growing richer, and the gulf between the possessed and the dispossessed was deepening and widening. How this is going to affect future production and the economic stability of society, on which so much of its present social and political super-structure is built, I do not know.

15

DACCA : NOVEMBER 1943

From Contai I returned to Calcutta. I had a spot of work to attend to in the city, and it took a fortnight before I could arrange my business sufficiently well to enable me to leave for East Bengal. Dacca was first on my list. I had passed through Dacca once before, years ago, but I had never spent a day there and got to know the place. From Calcutta I took the train to Goalando Ghat, from where I got aboard the Dacca Mail steamer. The Padma, down which the paddle boat *Kiwi* ploughed its way, was quiet and mild. I had been on the Padma once before during monsoon time. Then she was like a raging, tumultuous, muddy sea. The little boat I was in was being lashed about and the Captain had to anchor her in order to save her. This time it was different. The *Kiwi* was a big boat and a fast one. The river was like a sheet of glass and everything was comfortable and pleasant. On both the sides of the river, I saw miles on miles of bare fields from which jute had been recently harvested, and here and there were patches of rice fields on which the *aman* lay golden ripening in the sun. In a fortnight they too would be harvested. It was difficult for me to imagine that in the hamlets that came into the view and disappeared, as the river boat chugged its way along,

there lay thousands of people stricken by hunger and disease.

Dacca district with a population of a little over 4 million grows just enough rice to feed its population for five months in the year. Its main crop is jute and, in spite of the "Grow More Food Campaign", the area under jute in 1942-43 was not much restricted. In fact, in the face of popular demand for fixing the jute acreage of the province at 25 per cent of the normal, the Fazlul Huq regime fixed it around 50 per cent of the normal, and the jute growers raised the acreage still further by growing more. The Calcutta jute merchants were powerful. They needed jute and didn't bother if Bengal starved to grow jute instead of rice. They wanted jute, enough of it and at a low price, and they had it. What was true of Dacca was true of Faridpur, Mymensingh and parts of Noakhali and Tippera which all grew jute and which were all hit hard by the famine.

In normal times, Dacca used to import rice from Barisal, Faridpur and Mymensingh, and rice used to be sold for under Rs. 6 a maund. As a result of the boat denial policy and the administrative muddle in Calcutta in the first nine months of 1943, Dacca could not get much aid from her neighbours, and it was in Dacca that rice rose to the phenomenal price of over Rs. 100 a maund towards the end of August 1943. The second city of Bengal starved to its bones and several hundreds perished on its streets. At the time I visited Dacca, the city's Relief Committee had by heroic effort brought the situation under control

and there were very few street deaths. But the death-rate of the city was around four hundred a week, over eight times the normal. After the famine, disease was taking its toll.

Conditions in Dacca began to worsen by the middle of July, and the first deaths from hunger occurred on the roads by the end of the month. As was the case in Calcutta, there was no organisation in the beginning to remove corpses and to dispose of them. There were no relief kitchens. Chaos ruled for a time till the Dacca City Relief Committee, headed by that able man Judge Jnanankur De, took over control and saved the city. Judge De should be doing a bigger job than administering justice and relieving one city. He has energy; he has vision. He was able to get the co-operation of all parties and groups in Dacca to run his schemes. His Committee effectively broke the backbone of the black market in Dacca. It successfully rationed a population of over 200,000. At the time I was in Dacca, it was running 13 free kitchens, 68 cheap canteens and 62 free milk canteens, providing either free or cheap meals for over 25,000 people every day. All this stupendous relief work was being carried on without a pice of monetary help from outside. As Food Minister Suhrawardy admitted in an open meeting in Dacca, the city's Relief Committee had succeeded in achieving what the Government had failed to achieve. It was only after his visit that some kind of subsidy was granted to help the Committee carry on its cheap canteens.

This was how the Dacca Relief Committee

held down the situation and broke the black market. As the situation grew from bad to worse in August and as the price of rice sky-rocketed to over Rs. 100 a maund in the black market, Dacca was faced with the grim prospect of mass starvation. The lavish promises of the Government in Calcutta to send food to Dacca were found to be without any substance. Supplies grew shorter and the black-marketeer, who possessed a perfect espionage service, knew that no food was coming to relieve Dacca. He fleeced the people and drained the fat from their bones in a perfectly naked and open manner. Judge De, who could not bear to see his people die, called a conference of the leaders of the city, and the conference decided to ration first the poorest and the neediest and to get the rations for them through the controlled shops. The scheme did not work for very long. It also did not work well because the controlled shops were really uncontrolled and the big stockists, from whom the Government directed the shops to got their supplies, were the princes among the black-marketeers. The big stockists had their patron kings among officials of the Civil Supplies Directorate. The frustrated Committee eliminated the controlled shops, organised over a hundred *mohalla* committees to distribute food and obtained permits to make direct purchases from the stockists. The stockists erected hurdles in the Committee's way. They would delay deliveries, would not weigh stocks and tried to palm off rotten grain. They were powerful and had money. But the Dacca Relief Committee was determined. It put up its new scheme to the District Magistrate,

got it accepted, side-stepped the stockists and itself stocked grain meant for Dacca arriving in the name of the District Magistrate. It became sole purchaser and controller of stócks and so became its own efficient distributor. It obtained credit to the tune of Rs. 50 lakhs a month, improvised godowns, hired godowns and enforced rationing. On the small profit it made on the difference between the controlled wholesale purchase prices and the controlled retail sale prices, it ran its charitable relief work. In short, the Committee ran a food insurance scheme for the benefit of Dacca.

What the Committee did was to ensure that available stocks of food were equitably distributed to all alike. It had no control over stocks that did not reach Dacca, and at one time stocks were so short that the adult ration for a six-week period was only ¾ of a *seer* of rice and 1¼ *seers* of *atta.* This happened between the 8th of August and the 21st of September. That was the worst period of the crisis for Dacca. It was a period during which, as one high-placed I.C.S. officer told me, even a token stock of foodgrain sent from Calcutta would have helped greatly. He spoke bitterly. He said "the Goerings in Calcutta had obviously decided that, whoever starved in Bengal, Calcutta shouldn't."

The Dacca Relief Committee had succeeded in equitably distributing available stocks at controlled prices, but it could not ensure that every person was able to buy his rations. It found that about 20 per cent of the people did not take in their full quota as they had not the means to

buy food even at the controlled prices. Most of them, therefore, had to be served through cheap canteens, where, for an anna, they were given four *chapattis*, a ladleful of *dal* and a ladleful of vegetables, all cooked. The loss to the Committee on a meal was six pice. I was told by the members of the Committee that the cheap canteens were popular and that they would have to be maintained for a long time to come, at least till such time as the poor sections of the community could be set on their feet.

I saw several cheap canteens in Dacca, and one of them particularly interested me. It was in Dayaganj, a poor class quarter with a large number of Moslem residents. The canteen was being run by young Communist women. In the kitchen before blazing fires five young middle class Brahmin women, Ashalata Banerjee, three Goswami sisters—Jasudarani, Snehalata and Kamala, and Leela Chowdhury, were baking bread or boiling *dal* or distributing food. Occasionally they broke into song and sang in chorus, and my guide interpreted for me and said they were asking the people to be united to save themselves. The people they served were mainly Moslems in that area. Dacca, which for three years from 1939 staged the worst communal riots in Bengal, was learning to unite under the stress of the famine. In the Dacca Relief Committee, in the *mohalla* committees, in the cheap canteens and in the free kitchens, everywhere in fact I noted Hindus and Moslems working shoulder to shoulder, bent on serving and saving themselves. The Ministry headed by a Dacca Moslem notable,

Khwaja Nazimuddin, and containing his brother, Khwaja Shahabuddin, had failed to send timely succour to their native city. The people, however, stood united and saved themselves as best as they could. And they didn't do a bad job of it.

I went round a number of free kitchens, next. The feeding time was around five in the evening. The same familiar scenes one saw near any free kitchen were there. But the people did not look so emaciated as the ones at Calcutta. They had real good *kichuri* here. The kitchen at Jagannath College fed about 1,500 people a day and was ably run by Rebecca Ghose, the American wife of Principal Sailen Ghose. She possessed the efficiency of an American woman and the kindliness of an Indian mother. She was doing a bit of rehabilitation work, too. Twenty destitute women, whom she had picked up from the *kichuri* line, were making peanut butter for the consumption of American forces in the neighbourhood, and each of them was earning between 20 and 40 rupees a month. The women looked clean and healthy. They had work, good wages and food.

Besides rice, almost every necessary article of consumption was in short supply in Dacca. Vegetables, fish, mustard oil, milk, clothes and medicines sold for fantastic prices. Foot-and-mouth disease, which had broken out in an epidemic form in East Bengal, had killed very large numbers of cattle. Many of the districts, being in a forward area with huge military concentrations, were called upon to supply meat to the forces, and this also had contributed to the decline in the cattle population. Milk sold at

8 annas a *seer,* it cost under 2 annas a year ago; mustard oil was unobtainable at below 2 rupees 8 annas a *seer,* it used to sell at around 6 annas a year ago; eggs were 3 rupees a score, a year ago they were on sale at 5 annas; a five-grain quinine pill sold for a rupee and it could be had a year before at about an anna. If man lived by rice alone, the famine perhaps would not have killed so many people as it did. For every person that died for want of rice, at least two perished for want of medicine, clothing and other food necessary for the maintenance of life.

All over East Bengal, in Dacca, in Tippera, in Chittagong and in Barisal, wherever I went, I found the food famine was fast being succeeded by a medicine famine, which as a killer was even more ruthless than hunger. A peculiar type of malaria, variously called malignant malaria or Arakan malaria, was sweeping East Bengal, and in many cases the victims died within six hours of attack. Quinine taken orally was not much of a help. Intra-venous administration of quinine sometimes helped, I was told. Very few of the patients were near enough to hospitals to receive such timely and skilled help. Besides malaria, which had broken out in an epidemic form all over East and West Bengal, cholera had also broken out in parts of Dacca and Tippera districts. Men and women, whose vitality had been drained by months of hunger and malnutrition, had not much chance to fight successfully the battle for their lives. Due to lack of clothing, pneumonia, too, was on the increase.

The most affected areas in Dacca district were

Manickganj, Munshiganj and to a lesser degree Narayanganj and the Sadar sub-divisions. At the time I visited Munshiganj about 50,000 of its 900,000 people had perished of hunger, and many times the number of the dead were prostrate with malaria. It was a very thickly populated area before the famine (density : 2,000 a square mile), but death and migration to Assam were rapidly thinning the density. It was also a very deficit area as regards rice. Best unofficial estimates of numbers affected in the sub-division said the destitutes were over 100,000, and that nearly 300,000 were so badly hit that they needed food at subsidised rates, rates far lower than the controlled ones. 30 per cent of the living were down with malaria in addition to lesser numbers of others attacked by small-pox and cholera.

Munshiganj is a politically conscious area. The late Chitta Ranjan Das came from this place. Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose's village home was also here. Middle class Hindus are strongly represented here, though Hindus and Moslems are on the whole on a fifty to fifty basis in this sub-division. In this area several young Hindus and Moslems had turned Communist, and I chanced upon one such group in Munshiganj town. They said they took up the food question of the sub-division when the crisis was acute in June and July, organised hundreds of village food committees, introduced ration cards in several localities and helped exercise vigilance over hoarders and controlled shops. But supplies here were inadequate as elsewhere, the Administration was tardy in co-operation, black markets flourished

and several thousands perished. They said they had a plan. That was the Government should procure the entire *aman* crop with the help of the village food committees, and, having got control of all supplies, they should distribute their stocks with the help of the village food committees. In the political field, they wanted a united Ministry, by which they meant a Ministry in which all political groups in the Bengal Legislature would be represented.

After Contai and Tamluk, my impression was that Munshiganj was perhaps the next worst famine-affected area in Bengal. It was late November when I was there, and even then street deaths were happening. In Narayanganj across the river Meghna things were not much better. Narayanganj is a great jute trading centre with lovely bungalows on the shores of the Sitalakhya, famous for its sweet water. The misery of the countryside had, however, invaded the town, and everywhere there were little groups of ragged and hungry people looking for food. They had come away from the neighbouring villages, where they got neither food nor medicine. My friend Ramesh Bose of Poona who visited a village called Sidhiganj came back with the report of graves in its streets, of over 60 per cent of its population wiped out in the last three months and of the rest dying for want of quinine.

In Narayanganj town and its immediate surroundings excellent relief work was being done by the Ramakrishna Mission and other non-official organisations. I visited a hospital run under the Mission's supervision. It was financed

from the sub-divisional officer's relief fund. There were 125 patients in the hospital though there was accommodation only for a hundred. Further expansion was under way. Two Indian doctors, two American and five Indian nurses staffed the hospital and the patients were very well looked after. The hospital luckily possessed enough medicines, food and clothes. It was easily one of the best relief hospitals I had visited in the course of my coverage of the famine. It was an excellent example of perfect co-operation between officials and non-official relief organisations.

The Ramakrishna Mission had many centres in Dacca district from where relief was being given to the famine-affected. The Mission centre in Dacca had been affording relief to poor middle class families in cash and kind since May 1943. A little under 2,000 families were thus aided. The Mission centre in Narayanganj distributed relief in 48 villages in the neighbourhood and helped nearly 30,000 families in April and May, and as supplies thinned had to restrict its help to about 800 of the poorest families. They gave away a weekly dole of rice and *atta*; their ration worked out to about two *seers* of foodstuffs an adult a week. The Mission also ran three free kitchens at Sonargaon, Paikpara and Kalma, all in the Munshiganj sub-division of Dacca district.

Organised medical relief in the district was, in the main, carried on by the Government. They had built and were building new emergency hospitals. Existing hospitals were being expanded, and every dispensary was to have a twenty-bedded

annexe. More health staff and more medicines were to be provided. The Army was also taking in a hand in extending medical relief. They had Field Ambulances and tented hospitals, and their doctors were working in remote areas. All these measures were excellent as far as they went. But, did they go far? Compared to the extent disease had taken hold of the people, the efforts to relieve them were utterly inadequate; and this was the position, as I should like to say again, in spite of the Government stretching to the utmost limit all the resources at their command. They were perhaps doing their best. There could be no question about that. But it would be legitimate to ask whether they took sufficient precautionary measures to meet the disease situation that was looming in the background, lurking in the shadow of the famine. It was obvious even to the most dense-witted that the famine inevitably would leave behind it a legacy of disease. How was it that the Government had not got ready emergency hospitals till weeks after malaria and cholera had broken out in an epidemic form? Why did not they take sufficiently early such preventive measures as inoculation against cholera and typhus-fever and small-pox? Couldn't they have built up stocks of quinine and other drugs at key-points and assembled a staff of shock-doctors who could have been despatched at an instant's notice to deal with any sudden outbreak of disease at any point? At the end of a fairly extensive tour of West and East Bengal, I obtained the definite impression that the disease situation had got out of hand as completely as the famine situation had in the months

of August, September and October. Just as the famine failed to be anticipated, so, I was afraid, the disease situation also failed to be anticipated. All the doctors in Bengal with all the quinine they could possibly get hold of, I was sure, could not have fought down the malaria and cholera epidemics that were fast decimating the people in the famine belt of the province. The roots of the diseases lay in hunger and prolonged malnutrition. Food, not so much medicine, was required to cure them. A Government that failed to solve initially the problem of hunger could never hope to succeed in solving the consequent problem of disease.

High district officials informed me that large quantities of quinine had arrived for distribution to hospitals and malaria-victims in the rural areas. They were finding it a troublesome job to get hold of honest distributing agents. Doctors who signed prescriptions were corrupt sometimes, village officials to whom quinine was despatched for local distribution were not often above temptation and the drug rarely reached, either in adequate measure or in an unadulterated form, the persons who needed it most. There was a good deal of easy money in quinine. The controlled price was about Rs. 37 a pound and in the black-market it sold at between Rs. 300 and Rs. 400.

I met the Surgeon-General to the Bengal Government on board the Barisal boat as I was going to that place from Chandpur. He told me that some 50,000 pounds of quinine had been allotted to Bengal and more might be coming. At a liberal estimate, I calculated that it would suffice to cure 5 million malaria-victims, provided all that

quinine reached them. The quinine had reached many district headquarters and sub-divisional headquarters all right. The problem was to distribute it, and to see to it that it reached the people who needed it. General Paton was battling with that problem, but with what hopes of success I did not know. At least twice five million people were down with malaria and Bengal would need much more quinine than she had got.

16

TIPPERA : DECEMBER 1943

Tippera was in the grip of a malaria terror when I travelled in the district for a week early in December. The food situation was not much better either, except in areas directly served by rail or river transport. Vast tracts inland, away from communication lines, starved in more or less degree as before, though arrangements were under way for transporting food to them. I took the boat to Chandpur at Munshiganj Ghat and for three hours she ploughed the muddy waters of the Meghna before she turned into the Dakatia river to berth at the Chandpur jetty by nine of the clock in the night. Chandpur is an important rail-river traffic centre. You can take a train from there right to the heart of Assam; Chandpur is also linked by rail with the frontline town of Chittagong. Steamers from Chandpur will take you up the Meghna and the Padma to Dacca, Goalando and Serajgunj and even up to Dibrugarh, Assam's frontier town near Tibet; and from Chandpur, by river, you can go down to Barisal and Khulna and from there take the train to Calcutta. One of the biggest rice markets of Bengal, therefore, is naturally situated in Chandpur, though Tippera district grows only enough rice to feed her population of some four million for about seven months in the year. As I got down from the boat, I saw

across the river the lights of Puran Bazar twinkle, with their long reflections quivering on the stream. You must have seen in newspapers of some months ago quotations of rice prices at Puran Bazar. They used to be quoted when Puran Bazar's godowns were brimming with rice and Puran Bazar controlled rice markets in East Bengal. Puran Bazar's godowns, however, got emptied long ago in May 1943. And Tippera felt the first severe pinches of hunger in June.

In Tippera district the worst-hit area was Chandpur, a sub-division that grows more jute than rice. All the signs of distress mentioned in the Famine Code appeared in Chandpur as early as in April. Foodstuffs ran short, prices rose and wanderings of emaciated people were observed. Tranfers of land registered a sharp rise. A famine was in the offing. The sub-divisional officer warned the District Magistrate of the state of things, and test relief works were started. 12 lakhs of rupees were spent on test works and the daily attendance of labour was over 20,000. Wages were eight annas a day for a man, six annas for a woman and four annas for a boy. Those would have been good wages in normal times. But money didn't go far in 1943. In June a man's wages fetched only half a seer of rice, and it was not everybody who got work and wages. The first deaths from starvation occurred by mid-June in the rural areas, and towards the end of the month the first rural relief kitchen was started. A fortnight later, the first free kitchen was opened in Chandpur town itself. Not all the money sanctioned for relief kitchens could be spent on

them, as supplies promised from Calcutta did not arrive and there was not even a big enough black market to purchase foodgrains from. Government free kitchens, unlike non-official kitchens, were not free to buy grain from the black market to relieve the immediate needs of the hungry. So, between June and the end of November, out of the 13 lakhs of rupees that had been sanctioned towards free kitchens, not more than a tenth of the sum could be spent on them.

Chandpur and Tippera district could have built up enough stocks of rice for their consumption, if steps had been taken earlier in the year to control the movements of stocks held at Puran Bazar. The steps were not taken and rice continued to be sent out of the district. In May and June, only 33,000 maunds of rice were seized or unearthed in Chandpur by the Government. How much of even this was used for consumption in Tippera, I do not know.

As rice shot up to Rs. 30 and Rs. 35 a maund in June and July, landless labourers, artisans like weavers and smiths, and fisherfolk, who had reached the end of their resources, began to perish in their hundreds and thousands. The streets of Chandpur stank with the smell of the dead and the dying; and from June to the 15th of November 1943 over 3,300 street deaths were recorded. In the villages it was worse. Between August and the 15th of November, recorded deaths in the rural areas from starvation alone numbered over 10,000. Deaths from other causes, most of them, however, directly traceable to hunger, were many times that figure. A mildly worded official statement

said births in Chandpur sub-division were half and deaths double of what they were before the famine. The stark facts behind the statement were that young women of child-bearing age were dying fast and that the very young and the old were being rapidly wiped out by the famine. I should not be surprised, if out of the one million people in Chandpur sub-division one lakh had been killed by the famine and the pestilences that followed in its wake.

Food relief and medical relief in Chandpur were in the organisational stage when I was there. Large stocks of grain had arrived in the Government's godowns and more were being brought in by the Army from North Bengal, Khulna and Calcutta. Arrangements were in hand for the import of over 4,000 tons of foodstuffs a month. Difficulties were, however, being encountered in the despatch of stocks to the rural areas. Not even a tenth of the stocks in Chandpur had been sent to the rural interior. Roads were bad, many *khals* were unbridged or lightly bridged and it was difficult country for mechanised transport. The Army was beginning to get its teeth into the job and it had every hope of being able to send soon food to remote villages. Some kind of a rationing system was in operation in Chandpur town itself and, with occasional breaks and several adjustments, it had been working since March. In December every adult in Chandpur got daily a little over half a seer of foodstuffs, consisting of rice, dal, millets and sugar. I was told that sufficient stocks were available to maintain the scheme on that scale for some months to come.

When the famine hit Chandpur, there were at first no well-organised medical facilities to attend to the starving sick. The New Zealand Baptist Mission, headed by the Reverend B. N. Eade, hastily expanded their little hospital and took in as many patients as could be packed tight on their floors. No help came from the Government in the beginning and drugs had to be purchased in the black market for a time. The young doctor in charge of the hospital told me that starvation diarrhoea and dysentery predominated; and the cases of extreme anaemia he had seen there he had never seen before. Bronchitis and pulmonary tuberculosis were on the increase with the onset of the cold weather. Malaria, ordinary and malignant, had broken out in an epidemic form. By December this hospital had attended to over 4,000 patients. The death rate in the hospital was under 20 per cent. Two other hospitals in the town also took in diseased hunger-victims, the Elgin hospital and the Municipal dispensary. Between them they had handled over 2,500 patients. In Puran Bazar, across the Dakatia river, Army doctors were completing arrangements to open a 200-bedded hospital. Dispensaries in the interior were being equipped each with 20 beds to serve the urgent needs of their immediate neighbourhoods. More important than beds and drugs were doctors, trained nurses and sweepers for these emergency hospitals. The few young doctors in Calcutta and Dacca, who were available, were unwilling to volunteer for service in difficult interior tracts; trained nurses were even more unwilling and hard

to get; and as for sweepers, curiously enough, they all had to be imported from Orissa.

It was a sad and unpleasant fact to observe that, in a stupendous crisis like the 1943 famine, the people of Bengal had failed in many ways to rise to the occasion in helping themselves. Other provinces could and did send money, food and other essential material, but they could not send large numbers of skilled men and women workers who knew the language and the country sufficiently well to be of much service. Bengal's middle classes, which in good times provided the leadership of the province and which also reaped in large measure the benefit of any general prosperity, had sadly failed their own people in their hour of struggle against hunger and disease. Perhaps, if the crisis had come about in peacetime, a sufficient number of volunteer-workers might have come forward. In war time, with inflation, plenty of easy money waiting to be made in double-quick time, wide avenues of employment open to the educated and with economic distress necessitating work for wages, it might be that Bengal's young men did not find it profitable to serve their fellows. Also political leadership in Bengal in the past decade had not been such as to inspire the idealistic young to render voluntary public service. Wherever I went, whether it was a free kitchen or a milk centre, a home for destitutes or a hospital for the diseased, the cry was for workers, more workers, for men workers and for far more women workers. Calcutta's many thousands of young intellectuals, either reading in colleges or in their unemployed state hotly debating

politics in smoke-filled garrets, might well have risen to the call of the hour and served their people. As a class, they did not. In another country during a similar crisis all its schools and colleges would have been emptied out and their young men and women would have been compelled to do a year of social service before they were permitted to qualify for a degree. Calcutta's charming, young ladies, who sported leftist views in comfortable drawing rooms and all the while had their eyes on the victims they were tracking down, they, too, would have done better by their country and their fellow-women had they ventured out to Contai and Tamluk, Munshiganj and Chandpur and done a real job of work. These ministering angels perhaps spent their skill in assuaging the pain and anguish of intellectual brows and hearts in cultured Calcutta. They, too, failed to answer the call of agony. Strange was it, but true, that Bengal could not find three medical women like Shanti Soni, Vijaya Gokhale and Leela Bhagwandas to go to stricken Contai, Tamluk and Mahishadal.

I left Chandpur with a heavy heart for Comilla, the next stop on my itinerary. Comilla became memorable to me for Aifaljan. I came across her in a destitutes' camp in a suburb called Dharampur. It was eight in the night and I had done a day's job of walking for hours in graveyards and cremation grounds, looking at half-buried corpses being dragged out by fierce dogs and cleaned up by swarms of vultures. I was tired out. I wanted to finish with the destitutes' camp quickly, get back for a

wash and a meal and a long rest. I flashed my torch in an impatient farewell sweep round the huddled figures in the hut. For a moment I chanced to look into a pair of dark, beautiful and sad eyes. I drew in my breath and stopped. The sad eyes belonged to a young woman of eighteen, Aifaljan. She was dusky, thin and had a cleanly chiselled face. I stopped my guide, questioned Aifaljan and in a quiet, sad voice she told me her story.

She belonged to Heimchar in Chandpur sub-division. Her father was a boatman. Her mother died years ago and, soon after her marriage to Yakub Ghazi, her father also died. She had neither brother nor sister. She was happy with Yakub and bore him a son. She named him Jamamuddin and for three years her little son gave her joy as he grew up into a bonny child. The famine hit them in June. For ten weeks they struggled to keep their son and themselves alive. They sold their hut, sold their utensils, sold all they had, except the clothes they were in, to be able to buy food. They were willing to sell their labour. There was none to purchase it. They came to the end of their tether in September and their little Jamamuddin died. She said, "Sir, my child's last cry was for rice, a little rice. And I saw him die, because I could not give a little rice to him." Aifaljan called herself unlucky and for a moment cursed her fate. She did not know that there were people in Calcutta, New Delhi and London, who by their negligence were part-responsible for her son's death. The governing

must encourage in the governed faith in their *kismet*. It was a great defence against revolution.

For Aifaljan one sad event followed another in quick succession. Yakub, unable to support her, divorced her, abandoned her and left, he said, to join the Army. She began then her wanderings from free kitchen to free kitchen and, hearing that food was available in Comilla, came there by train along with several others of her village. She finally drifted into the camp and was wanting to get back to her village where she had no home. She knew the people there anyway, and she had heard that the coming crop was good, "I am no beggar", she said, "and I want to work for my food. I don't like to stay here."

Aifaljan wanted neither charity nor sympathy. She wanted work. Would she get it, or would she fall into the clutches of some brown-slave-trafficker, whose kind, I was told, flourished in those parts? She was good-looking and with good grooming would look very attractive. She would be a good investment.

During my stay in Comilla I met others who had more or less similar pathetic stories behind them. There was the aged farmer Mumtazuddin who had lost a big son and his wife in the famine and who had sold off most of his land, but who wanted to get back to look after one *bigha* of land which he still possessed. He worked as cook in the destitutes' camp. He, too, was no beggar. There was Subhasi Badyakar, whose husband was a professional musician and who in good times earned over two rupees a day. People had no money to engage him during the famine, and any

marriages that happened were solemnised in silence. Her husband deserted her and her husband's friend, Lal Mea, gave her a couple of rupees. She came to Comilla to look for food. I found her in the Ramakrishna Home for the destitutes. She, too, was no beggar.

This way of classing the famine-victims as beggars was scandalous. It was demoralising to the community. In the Comilla hospital I looked into the register and found every sick-destitute entered as a beggar, and officials very often thoughtlessly spoke of beggar hospitals, beggar homes and beggar centres. Another curious fact, which would be amusing were it not tragic, was in that hospital every hunger-victim's trouble was diagnosed as 'debility', not 'starvation'. I asked the attendant how it was so, and he said he had instructions to enter starving cases as 'devility' cases. He confused his b's and v's, and I thought to myself that it was a bit of sheer devilry to camouflage the naked truth in that shameless way.

One of the worst-affected sections of the community in Tippera district was the fishermen class. Landless agriculturists, too, were so badly affected that there was not sufficient labour available to reap the harvest. Between Brahmanbaria and Comilla, a stretch of some forty miles, I saw fields ready for the harvest lying unharvested. Labour fetched good wages, about Rs. 1-4 a day; and yet there was a great dearth of labour. I did not at all feel sure that Bengal's supposed ten million tons of rice would all be harvested without any appreciable loss.

Relief work in Comilla suffered considerably

due to the absence from the scene of the members of the famous *Abhay Ashram*. For over fifteen years, the *ashram* had been doing excellent constructive work in the area, running educational institutions, dispensaries and hospitals and well-organised spinning and weaving centres. In times of stress, they had always been to the fore in serving the people. Now their practised skill was unavailable. They were gaoled in 1942 together with other good men. The Town Relief Committee, the Ramakrishna Centre and the All-India Women's Conference were all doing bits of relief work, but they were handicapped for want of supplies for which they had occasionally to go to the black market.

I spent three days in the once-pretty town of Comilla. Being in a forward area, civilian life was not as alive as it used to be. And there were few women about the place. But I had a peaceful and lovely time in the home of Khiti Dutta with his very charming mother, who instantly adopted me. It was a home from home. But I had to go. I had still to cover a few more places. And one evening I said good-bye and left for the frontline town of Chittagong.

17

CHITTAGONG: DECEMBER 1943

From Comilla you reach Chittagong *via* Laksam rail junction. It is a night's trip by a slow train. Wishing to put in a night's sleep to be able to face better the day's work that lay ahead, I bought space in an Upper Class carriage. I had no luck, however, when the train arrived. I was groused out of all the Upper Class carriages, inside which men in khaki lay piled up thick as autumnal leaves. As the train was in no mood to wait, till I could give a bit of my mind to the station staff, I got into a third, and, finding it empty, thankfully stretched my bed. There were no lights in the train and so I didn't know I was travelling in a women's carriage—till indeed I had reached Chittagong and found out why a train inspector was staring curiously at me. Anyway, I had the dubious pleasure of travelling with an Upper Class ticket in a third class women's carriage. The point of it all is, if you are intending to travel in East Bengal, make your reservation early and *pucca* and always carry an electric torch. Of course, the best thing would be not to travel at all, as the railways advise us, unless you are prepared to travel like a sardine packed tight in a tin box.

It was early morning when I woke up a few miles before Chittagong. On the left a procession of green, jungle-covered hills kept company; and on the right lay paddy fields from which the *aman* was part-harvested. It was a beautiful morning

with thin clouds of drifting mist. The dew lay heavy on the ground. In another half an hour I had reached Chittagong.

Chittagong is unlike any other town in Bengal. The people, too, are somewhat different. Chittagong is the place where Bengal ends and Arakan begins. It is a very pretty town, with numerous hillocks on the tops of which the *sahibs* live in pretty bungalows. It has lovely, neat, winding roads that go up and down, and they are edged with tall, old, leafy trees. The people speak a kind of Bengali-cum-Arakanese-cum-Portuguese *patois* and few Bengalis pretend to understand that dialect. They are tough and hard-working. They provide the world's merchant marine with the major portion of their Indian crews. And Chittagong provided Bengal with one of her greatest leaders, the late J. M. Sen Gupta.

Chittagong district used to be the favourite hide-out of Bengal's old generation of bomb-throwers. Of late, the district has become the favourite parish of the Indian Communists. Every one of them of any importance performs a pilgrimage to this frontline town to pay his tribute to the wonderful *morale* of its much-bombed citizens. I suppose Chittagong's *morale,* like that of Chungking or London, acquires the characteristics of fatalism and the people just stay put after a couple of experiences. Every city that has been bombed has learnt to take it, if the authorities keep their heads cool and wrapped in a wet rag. But no city can keep its *morale,* if the stomachs of its citizens are kept empty and the authorities keep jibbing at the problem. That was where the

administration in Chittagong failed; and if the people of Chittagong, nevertheless, kept their chins up, it was purely due to their own courage to face up to troubles. In that sense, the people of Chittagong deserve to be praised as a brave lot. A word of praise is also due to the Communists of Chittagong who, instead of blathering endlessly about the international situation, got down this time to do a bit of real tough job and helped ease the food situation.

Chittagong district is well-forested, its soil is fertile and it grows enough rice to feed its people for eleven months in the year. Being the district nearest to Burma, Chittagong in peacetime was the *entrepot* port through which a large volume of the Burma rice trade was handled. Chittagong had never in its history known a rice scarcity such as the one she had to endure in 1943. The worst period of the crisis for Chittagong was in September and October, when rice prices registered around Rs. 80 a maund, nearly twenty times the normal price. From Rs. 3-8 a maund in December 1941, before Japan declared war, rice rose steadily in price throughout 1942 till it touched towards the close of that year a ceiling of Rs. 18 a maund. The curve thereafter inclined upward steeply marking Rs. 35 in March 1943, and Rs. 40 in June of the same year. A private survey indicated that nearly 30 per cent of Chittagong's two million odd people were facing dire starvation. Double that number were going half-starved. In areas nearest the Japanese, distress was the greatest. In Cox's Bazaar area and in the island of Kutubdia, large numbers of people had perished un-noticed and

without help being rushed to them. Those areas were not under complete military administration. Or else, the Army might have stepped in and controlled the situation. The civil administration of Bengal was all of a piece, whether it was in Calcutta or in Cox's Bazaar, in Contai or in Kutubdia. It seemed to me to be an amazing piece of stupidity that the Government should have permitted distress to prevail in such a forward area. Japanese propaganda about their generous intentions of bringing rice into this country might be swallowed hook, line and sinker by the untaught people in forward areas.

Signs of distress were still in evidence in Chittagong town when I was there for a day. There were still small groups of wandering destitutes, mostly women with tiny children hanging on to them. Most of the destitutes, however, had been isolated and put in destitutes' homes. There were also a few free kitchens to feed those who were still on the roads. It was harvest time and, so, many of the destitutes had left for their villages where there would be work, wages and food for them. Only a small percentage of the crop had been brought in, as labour was difficult to get. Either the people were too weak to be able to do hard work, or those that were able had gone away to work for the Army where they got better wages and sometimes food as well.

The Government had opened a number of free kitchens in the rural areas, but, as the *aman* rice was beginning to be available, they were proposing to close them down gradually. The Communists were going about seeing to it that the Government

free kitchens functioned properly, that there was no cheating and pilfering. They also kept a sharp look out for hoarders, ran village food committees and carried on propaganda as to how the people should utilise the coming *aman* crop.

There was in existence some kind of an unscientific rationing in Chittagong, devised more as an emergency measure than with a view to putting the town on a permanent rationing basis throughout the period of the war. Most sizeable towns in East Bengal had some such rationing schemes working, and, except in Dacca, they were rather unsatisfactory as they depended for their success on such factors as availability of supplies (over which there was no control), the energy of the officials and the co-operation of the public. And the schemes did not have the sanction of the law behind them. If the people were assured, that, whatever happened, they were entitled to their rations and if supplies were regularised, then that would be a great help. All the people were keen on rationing and, on their part, they were quite willing to co-operate to any extent desired of them. Rice was available in the black market in Chittagong town and district at prices of a rupee or so above the controlled rates. But the controlled prices were themselves so high (Rs. 16-8 a maund) that rice was beyond the means of a vast majority of the landless working classes. It was quite obvious that the authorities would be committing a mistake, if they closed down the kitchens in the expectation of a good harvest and falling prices. Somehow, prices did not fall quite as fast as the Government expected, and, strangely enough,

towards the end of my tour of East Bengal I heard reports that prices were going up in Dacca district. Prices, once they reached a certain level, tended for a long time to remain at that level and showed considerable reluctance to fall. The fall in any event was most gradual.

Malaria and a host of bowel-diseases were also taking their toll of life in Chittagong. Medical facilities, as elsewhere, were none too adequate. The deathrate in Chittagong stood at over 800 per cent of what it was in the previous year. In November, Chittagong's healthiest month, it was over 1,200 per cent of what it was a year ago.

Here are the figures :

Death-rate in Chittagong town

	1942	1943
June	85	238
July	63	326
August ...	80	740
September ...	75	510
October ...	75	623
Till the 21st of November ...	33	424

A great majority of the deaths in East Bengal due to hunger and disease naturally occurred among Moslems. In East Bengal, they outnumber the Hindus by almost three to one. In West Bengal, the majority of the victims were Hindus, as in that area they outnumber the Moslems. The famine was showing no communal preference. The diseases that had broken out in violently epidemic forms were behaving no better. During such a

crisis, a Hindu Government in Calcutta could not have saved the Hindus. A Moslem Government was actually in power and it had not saved the Moslems. A good Government based on the people's will and support and bent on serving them might have saved both the Hindus and the Moslems. Jinnah was running an imitation Pakistan in five of India's eleven provinces, under the overall supervision and control of New Delhi and London. Of what use was it to Aifaljan and Mumtazuddin, two of the hapless destitutes I met in Comilla? Of course, he would turn round and say that it was only an imitation Pakistan, and that in a free and full-fledged one everything would be lovely and everyone a prince. If he could only convince everybody of that, then nobody would stand in his way. In fact, Hindus should be wanting to rush into that delectable realm.

What folk like Karthik Haldar, Ananta Kumar Ghosh, Abdur Rahman and Mumtazuddin wanted was food and enough of it, clothes enough to protect them from the weather, a roof over their heads and a bit of help when they got ill. If they had a chance to vote and if they knew what it all meant, then they would vote any party into power that promised them these. They wouldn't bother a dud, brass pice, whether the party that promised food to them was pro-Pakistan or anti-Pakistan.

Before leaving Chittagong, I went to see the relief hospital in the town. Ramesh Bose of *The Sakal*, Poona, who had preceded me, had asked me to look up *Z* . . ., a destitute patient in

the hospital. You might have read her story already. If you haven't, then here it is. I saw her for a few minutes. She must have been a regular village belle before the famine struck her down. She still had large, liquid eyes, fine, dark eyebrows, and a nose and a chin that would have delighted an artist. She was seventeen, though she looked thirty. She and her husband were quite well-to-do in a small way, and they had land, bullocks and rice. Her husband, however, sold all his stocks and his bullocks in a rising market, hoping to buy them back when prices fell. Prices refused to fall, and he had to sell his land, his house and finally everything his wife possessed to keep alive his family. Then they came to a stage when Abdul, her husband, had to beg for their food. He begged for a while, and then died since he gave all he got to his wife and their new-born child. He said she needed food more than he. They were very much in love with each other. Z . . . then left her village home in Satkania and walked to Chittagong, where she had heard that she and her child could get some food. For three days, she did not get any. Some one who could feed her fell for her beauty and Z . . . had no other choice than to live with him. But her child was too ill to survive, and she too was in a bad way. Her son died and she was thrown out of her temporary home. Her dead child, she threw into the Karnafuli river, and she finally landed in the hospital. Z . . . had no will to live, and perhaps she is dead by now. Again and again she said, "My child was like a *Champa* flower".

18

BARISAL : DECEMBER 1943

Chittagong was the furthest point I had set myself to see, and I wanted to get back to Calcutta by way of Barisal and Khulna. I wanted to see Bengal's richest rice district, which had been as much affected by the famine as almost any other bad patch in the province. My luck had turned and this time from Chittagong to Chandpur I had a whole Upper Class coupé to myself. After a night's perfect sleep, I reached Chandpur. The Barisal boat took her own time to arrive. I had to wait for four hours. The railway refreshment room provided me with coffee and there was a Professor from Chittagong to share it with, and I was content. The Barisal boat turned up at last about ten in the morning and she had a couple of vacant berths. She was the best little boat I had travelled in and her butler gave me two buckets of steaming hot water for the bath. That was really something to be thankful for. General Paton, the Surgeon-General to the Bengal Government, was on board, and so was Ramesh Bose.

I was told that Barisal was nine hours away and that we might reach there by seven in the evening. We would be travelling all the day on the Meghna, the Arial Khan Bhil and the Keertankola. It was a country where every prospect pleased the eye and only man was sick. On both

sides of the Meghna the land was flat with few groves of trees, but as the boat entered into the Arial Khan river the vegetation changed. Enormous groves of the betel-nut palm and the coconut palm fringed the banks, and one was reminded of the coastal strips of Malabar. Alligators with open mouths stared at us as we passed and the porpoises were great fun to watch. We were passing by the side of some of the richest rice lands in the province. The soil would want no manure. Every year Barisal's numerous rivers in their floodtime deposited their treasure of silt on the vast rice lands, renewing their fertility. Little labour was needed to raise the ample crop. To this land, amazingly enough, famine came in 1943.

It was dusk when we entered the Keertankola river on whose right bank Barisal town is situated. A brilliant moon was up and a mist thin as gossamer hovered over the river. It was fascinating to watch the boat picking her way forward, avoiding submerged sandbanks and skirting a *char* island here and another a little further down. In another hour we berthed at Barisal Ghat and the lovely quiet of the deck was broken by passengers and porters rushing in and out. I could never understand why passengers when they arrived at a destination should get suddenly excited and want to rush out.

Barisal, otherwise known as Bakergunj, is popularly known as the granary of Bengal. It is a riverine district with not a mile of railway in it. It consists of over a hundred big and small islands, intersected by scores of big and small rivers and

khals. Its big crops are rice and betel-nuts, and its rivers provide plenty of fish. Its people are insular by temperament. Those living on distant *chars* and on the islets in the *Sundarban* area have little traffic with the outside world. Barisal, except in the southern parts, raises two crops of rice a year. The yield is high, every acre averaging between 30 and 35 maunds of paddy. 75 per cent of the land in the district is under cultivation. Even in years of very poor production, the district used to be a surplus one as regards rice. But during the period between April 1942 and April 1943, Barisal was rendered a deficit disrict. Its fine *balam* rice was not available for its own people.

In April 1942 the boat denial policy was applied to Barisal. Of all the coastal districts in Bengal, Barisal was the worst hit by this policy. In Barisal, where roads are few and there is not a mile of railway, boats play a vital role in the economic life of the people. Apart from carrying traffic, boats are essential in Barisal to the raising of paddy. Barisal also suffered from the rice removal policy. Allegations were made that rice much in excess of the quantities specified by Government was moved out of the district, both by Government and non-Government agents. It is not a difficult job to move rice out of the district in a surreptitious way. Barisal has too many unguarded rivers and *khals* leading in and out of the district. For the speculative agents, who bought rice, no price was too high to pay to get the stuff into their hands. Government and non-Government agents paid prices above the controlled

rates, they competed in the same area, they helped raise prices, they brought about panic among the consumers and in every way effectively set the stage for the entry of an artificial, man-caused famine. Other areas in Bengal might have got into trouble due to genuine scarcity, but scarcity of rice in Barisal was unthinkable. Nobody could explain away the famine in Barisal either as an act of God or as a natural consequences of even war-time conditions. While there was undoubtedly a certain amount of hoarding in Barisal by the richer class of farmers, there was certainly a genuine scarcity of rice in the months of September and October.

Prices rose in Barisal from under Rs. 5 a maund for rice in January 1942 to around Rs. 11 by the end of the year. Barisal within living memory had never known Rs. 11 a maund for rice. The 1942-43 *aman* crop in the district was somewhat below the normal, as late monsoon rains had affected the paddy while it was in flower. The cultivator, who had watched the upward trend in prices, held on to his new crop for as long as he could and released his produce gradually to the market. Thus came about the strange phenomenon of rice selling at Rs. 13 and above a maund immediately after the harvest, when the market would be expected to be glutted with the commodity. The Fazlul Huq Ministry, then in office, was operating on paper a policy of price control of rice. They did nothing to check the activities either of their own agents or of the trade to buy rice at above controlled rates. A couple of months later, when a considerable quantity of rice had

disappeared to emerge in the black market at very high prices, the Fazlul Huq Ministry, instead of fighting the black-marketeers, knuckled under to them and removed price control. The black-marketeers became merrier; they came out in the open and charged what they liked.

Month by month rice prices rose in Barisal till they reached a ceiling of Rs. 50 a maund in September and October of 1943. The Ministry that succeeded Fazlul Huq's repeated many of the mistakes committed by their predecessors. Their agents, too, purchased rice at any price. They and the trade turned a surplus district into a deficit one by the simple process of draining away the district's stocks to hoards outside. I was told that, on the day previous to the introduction of price control in August 1943, Government agents bought rice in Barisal at Rs. 40 a maund which was then the ruling price.

Most of the cultivators in Barisal gained initially by the high rice prices. Agriculture became a paying proposition. But later on in the course of the year a great many agriculturists lost their gains by having to pay high prices for articles other than rice which they needed for their consumption. Cattle diseases also affected Barisal very badly and farmers had to buy bullocks from Jessore and the Santal Parganas at four and five times the normal price. Only those few cultivators (about 10 per cent) who farmed land in a big way came through the crisis with more money to their credit. To a certain extent they contributed to the general hoarding in the province. The anti-hoarding drive did not bother them as they

generally lived in far away places; and Barisal is difficult country to enforce the law. Barisal folk are reputed to be tough. The hoards of the merchants, however, were more easily located and and seized.

If the landed agriculturist class generally was not much affected in Barisal, the landless labourers, artisans, fishermen, betel-nut growers and the lower middle class were in terrible plight. Barisal has extensive betel-nut plantations and it is a very paying cash crop. A cyclone in 1941 laid low many of these palms, especially in the Bhola sub-division, causing an economic crisis whose effects were felt most acutely during the famine. The middle classes in East Bengal are mainly Hindu, not Moslem, and they do not generally farm land. Next to the landless, the lower middle class suffered most from the famine. It is now on the verge of bankruptcy and another disaster will push it overboard. In Dacca I heard that students fainted in classrooms and their famished teachers were in no healthier state. Many of the students there got their food from the cheap canteens. The future leaders of the country were having a bad time indeed. In their anger they said the famine had been engineered by the Government to crush the Hindu intelligentsia. I do not think it can be true. The famine has affected alike all members of any particular class without discrimination of their religious affiliations. In Bengal, the lower middle class happens to be largely Hindu and so they have suffered in greater proportion.

The middle class also suffered because no organised Government relief touched it. Free

kitchens, homes for destitutes and emergency relief hospitals were, in the main, meant for the working classes. Middle class people were free to go to them. But they wouldn't and couldn't because their notions of respectability stood in their way and it was also difficult to jostle with hundreds of unwashed men, women and children for a meal of gruel. They would prefer to get dry grain doles. The Ramakrishna Mission and a few other non-official organisations gave away dry grain doles, but they could not serve more than a fraction of the middle class people who stood in urgent need of help. Many district Magistrates, when approached for help were reported to have disowned responsibility for aiding the middle class and said that if they would not go to the free kitchens they should fend for themselves.

Land transfers in East Bengal, as in the famine-affected areas of West Bengal, were on the increase. In Chandpur the Registrar was handling 70 cases a day, whereas in the previous year around the same time he had an average of 15 cases a day. In the beginning land was transferred to get high prices, but later on distress sales became the rule. 75 per cent of the transfers were made by illiterate persons. October was the peak month for such transfers, and at one time business was so heavy that there was not enough stamp-paper to meet the demand. 75 per cent of land transferred went to cultivators themselves while the rest was bought up by war-contractors and absentee landlords.

Street deaths in Barisal town began to occur in July and the District Hospital in five months

had taken in over 600 starvation cases. Over 125 of them died. Late in November, the Army had also started a hospital in the town and it had over 100 famine-cases in its wards. Over 200 street deaths occurred in the town between September and December.

Here are Barisal town's mortaltiy figures before and after the famine.

Death-rate in Barisal town.

		1942	1943
August	...	63	96
September	...	42	97
October	...	42	234
November	...	67	273

I was told malaria, cholera and small-pox had broken out in epidemic forms all over the district, and deaths from disease would far outnumber deaths from the famine. As I have said earlier, all traffic in Barisal is water-borne and it will be extremely difficult to send medical aid to areas not on the regular river-steamer routes. Of course, several hundreds of the diseased will die unnoticed and un-publicised and therefore it perhaps really doesn't matter.

The Ramakrishna Mission, which has a long-established centre in Barisal town, was carrying on organised relief work from four places—Barisal town proper, Bamrail, Adhuna and Mallikpur, the last three in the northern part of the district. Dry grain doles to lower middle class people were being distributed and they had a scheme to distribute clothes and blankets. The Mallikpur centre was

organised to afford medical relief, but, for want of drugs, it could not render any large-scale service.

Barisal town was also experimenting with some kind of rationing in December. About 5,000 ration cards had been issued to families with an income of under Rs. 25 a month, and from June onwards they were provided with varying quantities of rice and *atta* according to the extent of supplies available. Sometimes it was 16 seers of rice a month (whatever the size of the family), sometimes 2 seers with an additional 2 seers of *atta*. Neither the District Magistrate nor the municipal authorities had any control over supplies, and what quantity the people got depended on what the local authorities got from the Civil Supplies Directorate.

My coverage of the famine ended at Barisal. A fortnight's journey in East Bengal under famine and wartime conditions could be most wearisome. I longed to get back to Calcutta. So in the evening, as the sun was setting behind the coconut groves of Barisal town, I took the Khulna boat to catch from there the mail train to Sealdah. Except in patches, it had not been a very pleasant trip. There was too much misery around, and the air was thick, heavy and foul with unrelieved distress, disease and degradation. The famine had been more or less driven out of urban areas, but it still was there in the countryside. I was afraid it would continue to stay there till the people had recovered once again the means to purchase food at prices within their reach. Epidemics of cholera and malaria raged even more ferociously than the famine did, and it would need long, patient and

costly endeavour before they could be eradicated. The Government of Bengal and the Ministry were at last stirring themselves to fight the twin evils of famine and disease, and I had no doubt they were doing their best and were sincere in their efforts. The problems, however, appeared to be bigger than their efforts to solve them, and, I was afraid, they would continue to be so till the people's confidence and their co-operation could be won to fight what was truly a province-wide calamity.

The Khulna boat weighed anchor and slid down the river and in ten minutes the lights of Barisal faded out of view. The Keertankola streamed ahead like a wide strip of silver in the bright moonlight. She flowed without a murmur, gently; and there was not a ripple. She must have seen many turns, happy and unhappy, in the fortunes of the men and women living on her shores. She was witnessing then an unhappy state of things. But she flowed on without a ripple.

THE CURTAIN COMES DOWN

19

THE NIGHT IS BLACK

Calcutta at last; the luxury of a warm bath, cool and fresh clothes, and a clean, hot meal helped repair a good deal the strain of a three-week's tiresome trip. The city had had a raid—its heaviest—while I was away, and the air was full of talk about it. My heart and mind were, however, elsewhere. I remembered the sights I had seen of human misery in Contai and Munshiganj, Comilla and Chandpur. And with a heavy heart I set to work to write of what I had seen. It was not easy. It was not pleasant. Ten days' effort on the typewriter brought me to the end of the previous chapter. Thoroughly fagged out, I pushed away the typewriter, switched off the lights and got out on to the maidan for a long walk by myself to collect my thoughts. It was pitch-dark, except for occasional flashes of light from the overhead powerlines as the tram-cars' guide-pulleys rolled along their joints. The stars looked down on a sleeping world and everything seemed still in sleep. But, far out in the remote villages of Bengal, I knew men, women and children were not sleeping the sleep that came to those who had had a full meal after the day's toil. Many of them were fever-stricken, hunger-stricken and would have no sleep.

I asked myself what chances they had of being relieved in the present and of being saved in the

months to come. I had seen hundreds of free kitchens, cheap canteens and milk centres at work. Government Press Notes said that over two million people were being fed at those. I did not disbelieve those statements. But that only meant to me the index of the vast suffering around. Most of those, that fed at the free kitchens, were in no condition to work; and none of them could be maintained on unorganised private charity, for that had dried up in the blight of the famine. How were the famine-stricken going to be set up on their feet? Most of them had no homes or means of livelihood. Could they for ever wander under the sky and the stars? The free kitchens were gradually closing down; and destitutes' homes—they could not be run for years. And what about disease? The Army, the Civil Government and a few non-official organisations were doing splendid medical relief work. But would they be able to reach all those who needed help, or even a major percentage of them? I doubted it. I had no desire to criticise adversely any efforts at mitigating suffering. The Government were really waking up and their machinery of relief was clearly picking up momentum; and the Ministry was in earnest, was sincere and was doing its best to ease the harshness of the blow.

The past, however, did not worry me so much as the immediate future. With the turn of the year, Bengal had come to the end of a phase. The past in its debris had buried Bengal's dead. It did not matter if so many of them had died before their time. The stark reality was that no amount of arguing would restore them to life or fully

repair the damage. But how about the future? With the promise of a bountiful harvest, was Bengal going to turn the corner and did she see ahead of her the prospect of safety? Or, was there any, as yet unknown, danger lurking in the dark future, hatching in the womb of time and ready to descend on a hapless people and smite them again? Would there be a repetition in 1944 of the holocaust of 1943? Would Bengal's countryside be once again laid waste and strewn with the wrecks of her children? Thoughts like these worried me.

I counted up the favourable factors. Firstly, there was the bumper harvest of some ten million tons of rice. Secondly, Calcutta was being taken off the Bengal market for a year. Thirdly, there was to be no export of rice this year from the province. Fourthly, there was to be rationing in urban areas. Then there was the policy of the Bengal Government regarding the procurement of the *aman* crop, under which inter-district movements of rice except under permits were banned, individual procurement of foodgrains for the needs of industrial labour was abolished, competitive buying was discouraged, price-control was to be enforced and Government buying was to be carried on in a cautious manner and normal trade channels were to be utilised as much as possible. The administrative machinery, which had the benefit of a severe lesson, might also be expected to function more efficiently. Very important of all, the Ministry would be on its trial in a fair field with no handicaps, and it could have no convincing excuse to offer, if it failed to save the people in

1944. And so, the Ministry, too, might be expected to do its best to steer the province safely in the coming year. Outside Bengal, the Centre under Wavell was showing a new determination and energy to deal with food as an all-India issue. Recalcitrant provinces were being taught to toe the line and step correctly according to orders. A soldier-Viceroy was on the job and he could be trusted to do it well. The Centre was also sympathetic to Bengal and was willing to go out of its way to help her by providing her with food, transport, drugs and clothes. The Army were doing a magnificent job of service to the people. These were the good signs.

I counted up the disturbing factors. Chiefest of all, there was the people's utter lack of confidence in this or any Government's ability to save them. This psychological factor, which was a great contributory cause of the famine, I was afraid, had grown more important and it was going to be a terribly hard job to win back the people's confidence. They had learnt in the school of suffering a most painful lesson, and it was not going to be easy to make the cultivator part with his grain at any but quite high prices. Even then he would reserve for himself, his family and labour dependent on him, sufficient stocks to last for the year or till the next crop. Government's propaganda that he should sell now and that he would be able to buy back at a cheaper price was just sheer nonsense to him. I bet he wouldn't be caught napping that way this time. Besides, there was this fact to remember that though the rice crop had been good, other winter

crops like sweet potatoes, cereals and mustard had not been too good. The cultivator's confidence could be restored only if he saw in the market abundance of foodstuffs displayed for sale. This physical, ocular evidence of plenty would be very necessary to make him release his little hoard. Even if Bengal could not import rice from other areas in large quantities, physical display of any other foodgrain in *hats* and shops would go a long way to restore confidence.

Other steps to restore confidence would be to make available consumers' goods at prices the cultivator could pay. His needs were few. Kerosene, matches, cloth, kitchen utensils and agricultural implements were the few things he needed. Price control of major foodgrains alone was not enough. Everything the farmer needed would have to be price controlled and made available to him. Again, he would have to be assured of a fair price for his produce. Most of the bigger cultivators got a square deal in 1943, though the traders and the big-scale hoarders did much better. By bringing down middlemen's profits and by direct purchase, the cultivator could be assured of a fair price for his crops without the landless classes suffering unduly. If, however, the cultivator was going to be beaten down, either through threats or through dumping of vast quantities of food, he would have no inducement to grow more food in the coming year, and we should be having once more a real shortage. The 1943-44 *aman* crop was a bumper one, not because nature had been specially kind to Bengal in 1943, nor even because of the "Grow More Food" campaign, but

chiefly because the cultivator exerted himself to grow more, tempted by high prices. The main problem for the Government was to strike a balance between fair prices for agricultural produce and the ability to pay for it by the landless working classes. Lastly, the personal touch about which Wavell spoke was very effective with the cultivator. If he could be sympathetically approached by people whom he trusted, then he would listen to reason and do his share in easing the situation.

It was not only the cultivator who was likely to hoard. The urban middle class citizen had also little faith in the Government's ability to provide him with food. He, too, was not going to take any chances. He was also likely to lay up stocks to the extent of his financial ability. True, a vast majority of them had become poor during 1943, but food was more important than ready wealth, and they were likely to convert whatever cash reserves that lay with them into grain.

In addition to hoarding for consumption, hoarding for speculative trading was likely to persist. The degeneration in moral values created by inflation did not disappear in a day; and Bengal's speculators were not likely to be less greedy in the coming year. The sister evil of corruption was also not likely to diminish. The poison, I was afraid, had entered into the blood-stream of certain limbs of the administration as well as of the commercially minded public. It was bound to erupt in diverse evil and ugly forms.

This lack of confidence in a safe future was, I discovered, also shared by high officials of the

Bengal Government. Many high district officers in the worst-affected famine areas told me that they were apprehensive of conditions worsening around March of 1944. The harvest would have been gathered before then, and there would be little work on the land in February and March. And then, after the ploughing and sowing in April and May, there would be a long period of no work to the landless agriculturists. These numbered some twenty million. What was going to be their fate, if rice prices did not fall to the old normal price levels? Prices instead of being around Rs. 16-8-0, which was the controlled rate, were showing a tendency to mount up and in many places had indeed gone up far above that level. Again, how were work and wages going to be found in the coming months for Bengal's landless? Bengal's agriculture—her biggest industry—was suffering from many chronic diseases. And, while long-term plans were being put into operation to revive agriculture, it would be essential to keep alive Bengal's landed and landless classes.

I was also disturbed by the thought that the volume of relief measures was being reduced on the plea of a good harvest. From what I had seen, I felt convinced that free kitchens and dry grain doles would have to be maintained for a long time to come. While it was certainly demoralising to feed vast numbers of people on charity, it would be much more demoralising to let them wander about in search of food and starve and die.

Another step in the restoration of confidence would be to extend rationing over the entire range of consumers' goods, both agricultural and manu-

factured. It had been done in other countries and could be done here. If everybody could feel assured that somebody because he had sufficient money would not be able to corner rice or razor-blades, sugar or soap, dal or drugs, then he himself would not start hoarding. It was a strange way of going through a war with peacetime economic arrangements. That way had led to disaster in Bengal and was bound to give rise to another unless the order of things was radically changed.

As I thought over these psychological and material factors standing in the way of a recovery, my heart sank for Bengal. I could not forget that the same crew, who had fouled her against the shoals, were still on the bridge steering her in an uncertain sea without chart or compass and with little knowledge of the weather. Would they be able to pull up in time their fair vessel before the undercurrents twisted and turned her on the rocks to end up as a mass of wreckage?

The Muslim League Ministry in Bengal was on its trial, and a very severe one it was. In a sense it found itself in an unfortunate position. At any time, it would not be an easy job to run a province of over sixty million people. And especially in wartime, with little power and immense responsibilities, it was an almost impossible task. The administrative machinery in Bengal, by any standard, was ill-equipped, corrupt and inefficient to tackle wartime problems. The people were afraid and distrusted their Government. And the League Ministry would not go out of its way to win back the people's confidence.

It demanded co-operation from other political groups in the province on its own terms. With the result, there was and there would continue to be mutual recrimination, fair and unfair criticism and a general undermining of confidence. The ultimate sufferers would be the people. But who cared? Those who did and do care for them, many of them are languishing in prison. In a crisis like the recent famine that laid Bengal low, they could have done a grand job. Perhaps, they alone could have done it. Had they been in power, they certainly would have prevented it. And if yet the blow had fallen in spite of their best attempts to prevent it, they would have successfully done their best to mitigate its severity. They knew the people and the people trusted them.

The problem of famine, for me, resolved itself finally into the problem of power to order the destinies of this country. Famine was just one problem on one point in the circumference of our subjection. The central problem was that of the achievement of freedom and democratic self-government for India. So long as we were denied the power to arrange our own affairs in a democratic manner, so long there would recur preventible economic disasters resulting in indescribable human wretchedness.

The problem of Bengal was not one that was entirely her own creation. It must be studied in the larger context of India's subjection to alien rule. In the ultimate analysis, the Muslim League Ministry could not be solely blamed either for the famine of 1943 or for any danger that might visit Bengal in the not distant future. True, it would

be blamed for sticking to the shadow of power in order to satisfy its craving for the establishment of a spurious imitation of Pakistan. Unfortunately, its apparent hold over Bengal had not enabled the League Ministry to serve or save either Bengal's Muslims or their Hindu brethren. The tragedy of failure was writ large on all the efforts of the Muslim League Ministry. Unless there was a truly national, all-parties democratic Government at the Centre, with similar Governments in the Provinces, inspired by a fresh, selfless vision and energised by a new will to serve the people, the prospects of either saving Bengal or the rest of India appeared to me to be gloomy.

In his first public utterance at the December meeting of the Associated Chambers of Commerce in Calcutta, Viceroy Wavell unfortunately gave no expression to his recognition of this central cancerous political disease wasting every limb of India. Without political freedom there could be no freedom from want. Wavell is a very intelligent man. He is great in many other ways. It cannot be that he does not know what is the cause of this Indian malaise. Perhaps, he is not free to apply the remedy. He spoke of solving the problem of hunger by efficient administration. But the problem of India is more than one of mere physical hunger. It is one of spiritual hunger, hunger for freedom, hunger for freedom to think, to act and to experiment with new ways of government. To hope to solve what is fundamentally a psychological problem by administrative action, however efficient it may be, is a new therapy of which I have no knowledge. While few will deny

their good wishes to the new Viceroy in the task he has set himself of resolving the food problem of India, many will legitimately doubt whether the methods he proposes to adopt are really the best.

With these thoughts churning up in my mind, I found little peace even in the silence of the night. I looked up and the stars that glimmered were playing hide and seek amidst clusters of wandering clouds. Did those flaming, glittering bodies, tumbling and careering along their paths in the empty spaces of the Universe, regulate the fate of man on this tiny planet? "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars", but in ourselves that we were miserable. One thought led to another. I thought of Steinbeck, of "The Grapes of Wrath" and of Joad. I thought of what Joad said, "The whole thing's nuts. There is work to do and people to do it, but them two can't get together. There's food to eat and people to eat it, and them two can't get together neither." Yes, that might be the tragedy of Bengal in 1944. Indeed, within myself, I felt apprehensive that it would be the tragedy of Bengal in 1944. I could not share the complacent optimism of the authorities that soon all would be well. I wished my forebodings would prove false. To turn out to be a false prophet would have been a consummation longed for. There would be enough rice in 1944 for everybody in Bengal. The job would be to get the food to the hungry. Was that going to be done? Or, were the people again going to die like trapped rats, this time with plenty of food all around?

I found no hopeful answer. The night air was crisp, but it failed to refresh my weary spirit and I turned for home. It was very still and even the stray traffic had gone off the roads. The stars had disappeared behind banks of cloud and, as I stumbled in and out of the baffle walls, the night chowkidar flashed his torch, stirred himself and said good night. As a sign of recognition, he added, "It is a very dark night, *huzoor;* the Japanese won't come." Not wholly awake to what he said, I answered, "Yes, it is a very black night, but there are yet many long hours to go before it will be dawn."